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TEXAS RANGERS

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

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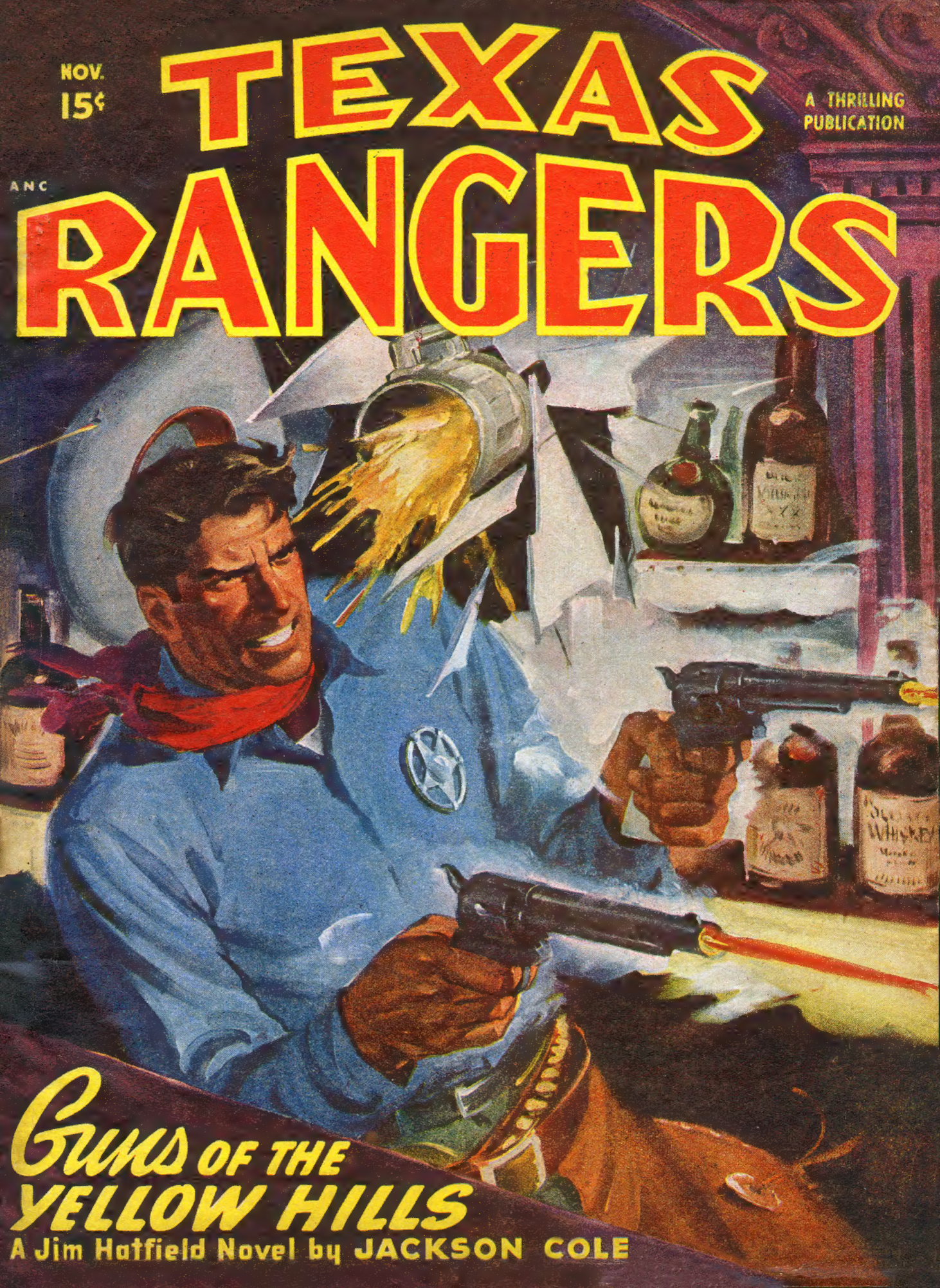

Guns of the Yellow Hills

A Jim Hatfield Novel by JACKSON COLE

Find out why the DEAF call *Beltone* a Miracle

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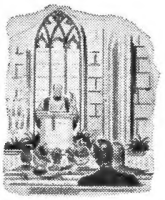
. . . and One Tiny Unit is all you wear

You'd call this new Beltone Mono-Pac Hearing Aid a miracle, too, if you had been wearing a clumsy battery pack with entangling wires, and then suddenly found the new Electronic Beltone. It's One-Unit . . . so small you can hide it with your hand—so light you forget you are wearing it—so thin it is lost from sight . . . so powerful and efficient, you bless the day you learned about it. No wonder more people hear with Beltones than any other one-unit hearing aid!



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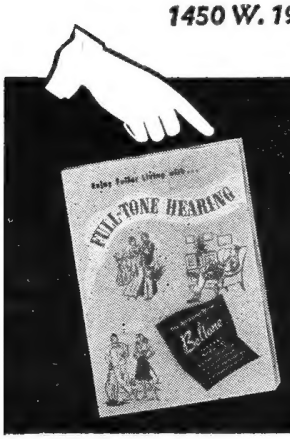

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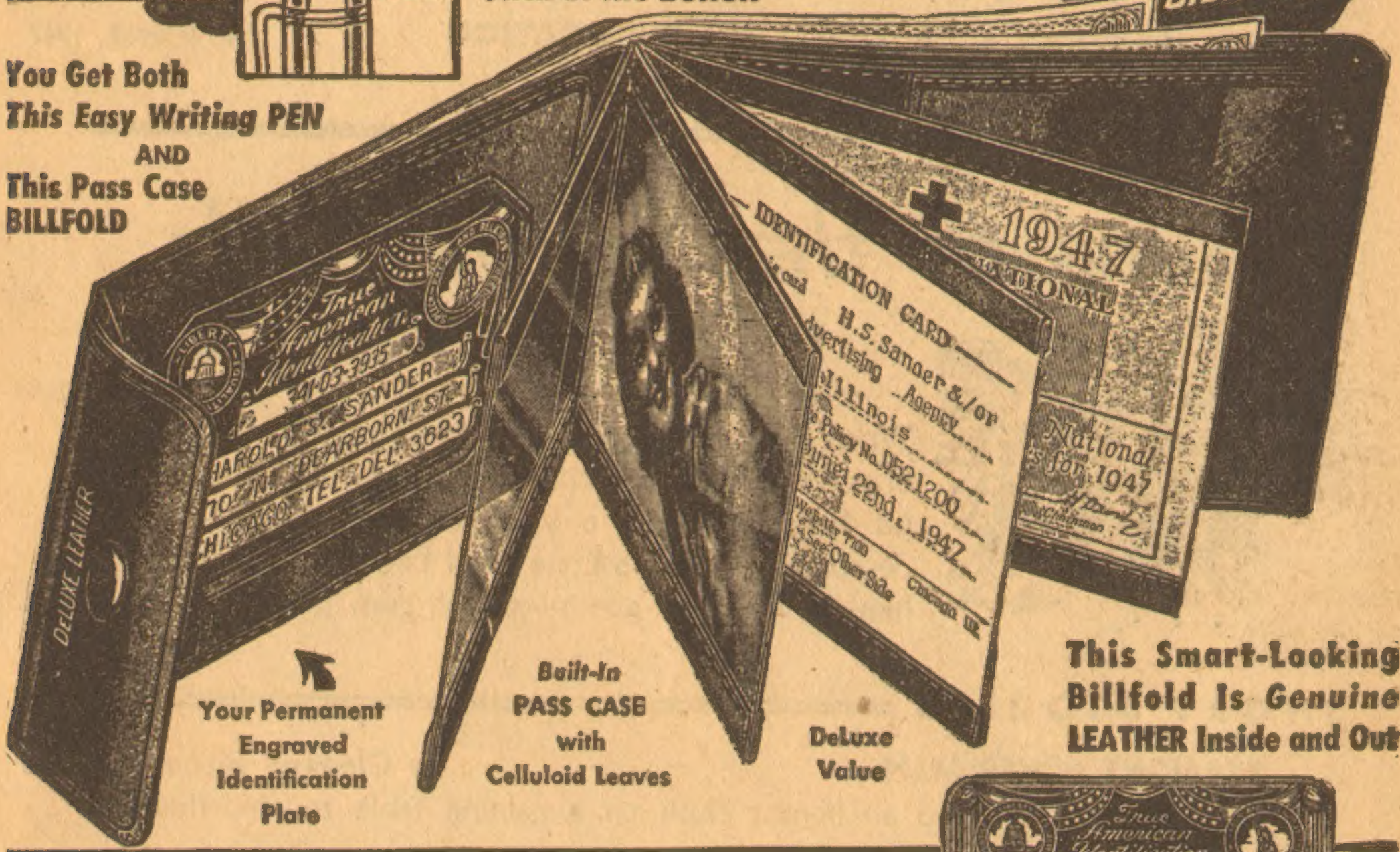

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***Built-in* PASS CASE with Celluloid Leaves**

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This Smart-Looking Billfold Is *Genuine* LEATHER Inside and Out

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Sensational Features!

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- Push button . . . it writes! Click button . . . it retracts! Safe! Can't leak!
- Guaranteed to write up to 2 years without refilling.
- Dries as it writes. No smearing, no scratching. 6 to 8 clear carbons.

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MY FULL NAME.....
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ADDRESS .....

CITY .....STATE .....

To save shipping charges I am enclosing • Social Security No.....
[ ] in advance $1.98 plus 20c Federal Excise Tax (total $2.18). Please ship my order all postage charges prepaid.

TEXAS RANGERS

VOLUME 28, NUMBER 3 A THRILLING PUBLICATION NOVEMBER, 1947

COMPLETE NOVEL

Guns of the Yellow Hills

By Jackson Cole

When the ranchers of Texas are haunted by the threat of sudden death and tragedy, Jim Hatfield rides in to pit himself against a villainous crew of evil range despoilers! Follow a Lone Wolf Lawman as he readies himself for a six-gun sweep of grim killer hombres! **11**

SHORT STORIES

STRAIGHT POKER MAN ***by Gladwell Richardson*** **68**
Cam Stevens preferred an honest flush on a gaming table to—fourflushers!

DOC SWAP'S MEDICO MIX-UP ***by Ben Frank*** **76**
When three strangers appear in town, the tradin' hombre hits the jackpot

SHOWDOWN IN DOS PUEBLOS ***by R. McDaniel and J. H. Latham*** **85**
Old Marshal Nostrom bucks Rut Gipson, notorious card shark and gun sharp

LONG SAM BLASTS THE BLASTER ***by Lee Bond*** **91**
Littlejohn goes on the hunt for a tough desperado and some schemin' hombres

AND

THE FRONTIER POST ***by Captain Starr*** **6**
A friendly get-together confab for readers, plus announcements and letters

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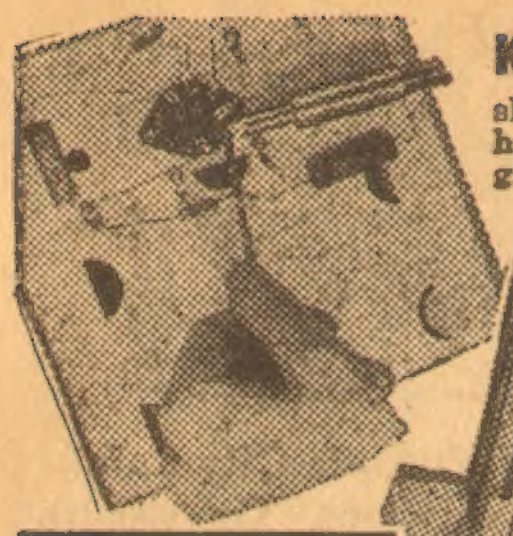

KIT 1 (left) I send you Soldering Equipment and Radio Parts; show you how to do Radio Soldering; how to mount and connect Radio parts; give you practical experience.

KIT 2 (left) Early in my course I show you how to build this N. R. I. Tester with parts I send. It soon helps you fix neighborhood Radios and earn EXTRA money in spare time.

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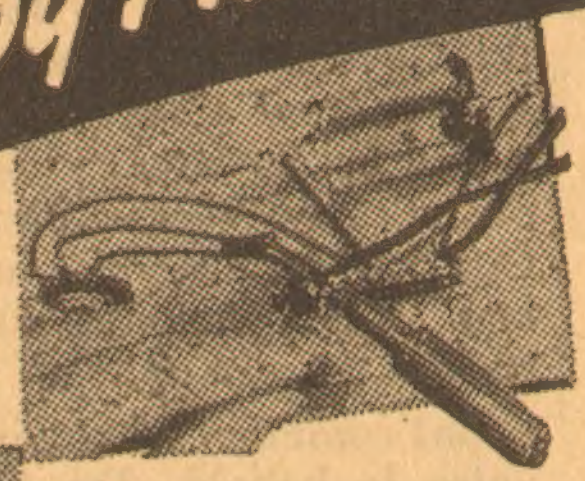
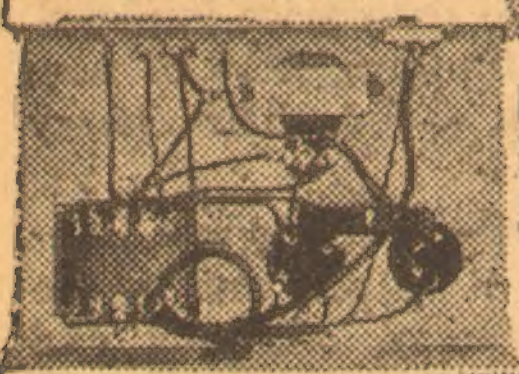
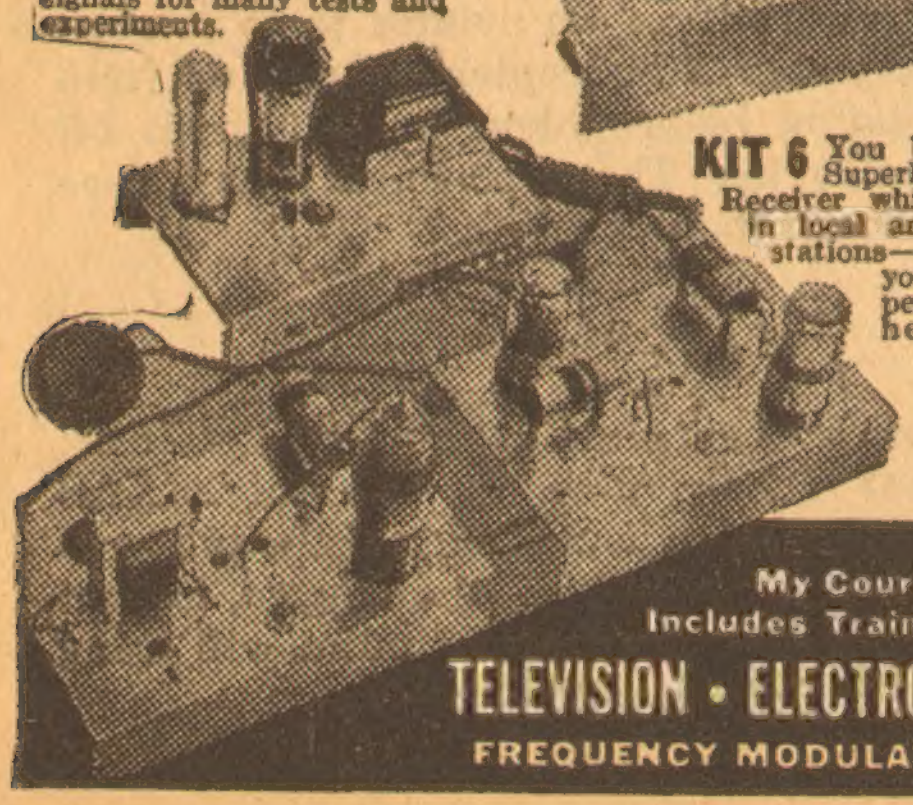


KIT 3 You get parts to build Radio Circuits; then test them; see how they work; learn how to design special circuits; how to locate and repair circuit defects.



KIT 4 You get parts to build this Vacuum Tube Power Pack; make changes which give you experience with packs of many kinds; learn to correct power pack troubles.

KIT 5 Building this A. M. Signal Generator gives you more valuable experience. It provides amplitude-modulated signals for many tests and experiments.



KIT 6 You build this Superheterodyne Receiver which brings in local and distant stations—and gives you more experience to help you win success in Radio.

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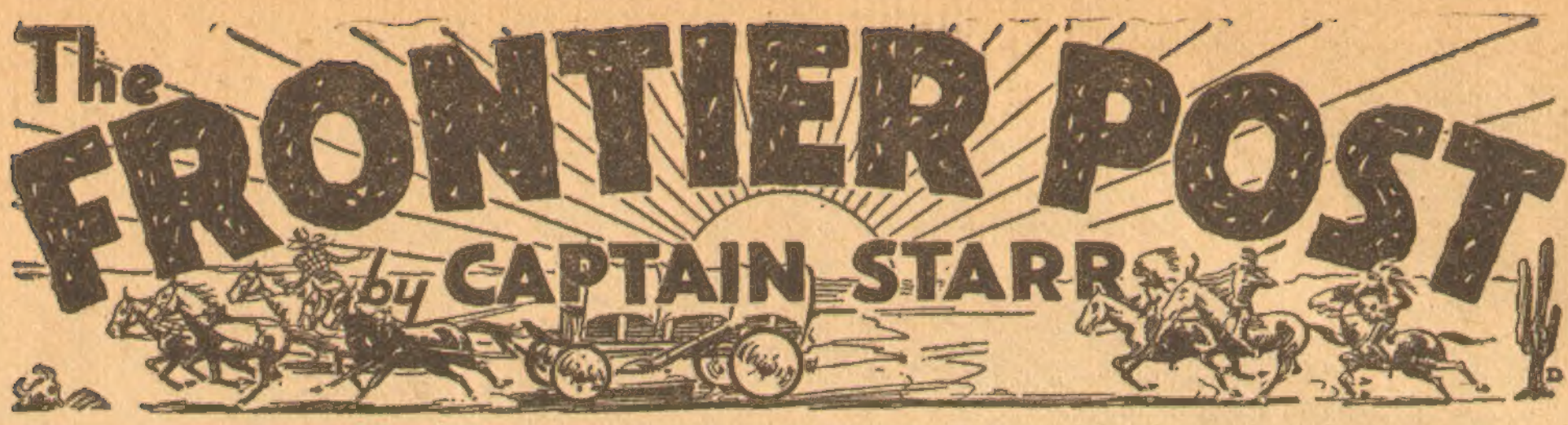

HIYA, gals and galluses! The days of miracles, in case you don't know it, haven't passed. Awhile back they had a "cricket plague" up along Columbia River. For years I've heard about such things. This time I was smack-bang in it. Along the highway the masses of brown, shiny bugs jumped and whirred to be crushed by rushing traffic. Then following hordes piled in to feast on their dead, until the road was heaped for miles with an endless windrow. Riding over them it sounded like crunching gravel. Cars skidded off into the sand.

Back in 1848, somebody remembered, a similar plague hit Salt Lake City, then a pioneer Mormon settlement, threatening destruction to every spear of grass in their path. The Mormons prayed. Flocks of seagulls came, devouring the crickets.

A Miraculous Migration

Somebody must have prayed up on the Columbia wheatlands. Because history repeated itself. Along came a few seagulls. Then a flock. Then the miraculous migration by thousands.

About the same time a county agent and some farmers and others got busy with DDT. I passed back along the plague area again about a week later. The crickets (called Mormon locusts) were gone. So were the seagulls. I wondered how the seagulls got along, stuffed with poisoned crickets. I'm still wondering. Myself, I prefer my miracles straight. Maybe I'd feel different if I was a Columbia wheat farmer. Maybe.

Sometimes people are like crickets. About the time that insect horde was feasting on its own dead, a bunch of Nevada citizens were tearing down Virginia City.

You all know what that name, Virginia City, stands for. It is—or was—the largest historical mining town in the West. It was the hub of the fabulous Comstock Lode. The silver that poured out of Virginia City founded many famous family fortunes. The wealth yielded in the 60s, some historians claim, tipped the balance in the War Between the States.

Virginia City was built of sound, heavy timber logged off of the nearby Sierras, and the mine shafts and tunnels took millions of feet of it, too. They said that a forest went underground in those days.

Now, on account of the building material shortage, wreckers are tearing down Virginia City, erasing it from the map. Just for the lumber that's there.

A heap of folks are worked up over it and are appealing to the Government and to the Governor of Nevada. But crusades such as that move slow. If this one does succeed, it will be too late, I reckon. That monument of the early West will be destroyed. Virginia City will be only a memory. It's plumb too bad. Anyhow, that's why folks remind me, sometimes, of crickets.

But sometimes human enterprise is pleasanter to behold. I'm thinking now of how some Western farmers saved their cherry crop this past season.

It's an old proverb that "it always rains at cherrytime." Well, it rained out in the northern California cherry orchards and clinging raindrops, once the sun came out, meant that the fine, ripe cherries would parboil and burst.

So growers hired an aviator to go swooping around in a helicopter. The wind from the rotating blades blew the raindrops off of the cherries. The experiment was a success. The crop was saved!

The Biggest Inch Pipeline

Have you heard about the "Biggest Inch" pipeline? By the time this issue of TEXAS RANGERS is in your hands, gals and galluses, it will be finished—the biggest, longest pipeline ever built. Its 1200 miles will bring

(Continued on page 8)

IMAGINE THEIR JOY

WHEN THEY FOUND THEY COULD PLAY

This easy as A.B.C. way!

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*H. C. S., Calif.

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INVITED TO PARTIES

"I enjoyed taking this course and I get a lot of pleasure out of it. I have made much progress and have many invitations to play at parties. I owe you much for making this possible."
*K.U., N.Y.

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"Anyone with musical ability should make good with your course. My little investment paid back a thousand fold. I have been playing for 4 years now. Today I play in one of our top bands."
*J.M., San Juan, P.R.

PLAYS AT DANCES

"I have completed your course and your lessons have been most satisfactory. I can play all of the popular songs. I have also earned money playing at dances."
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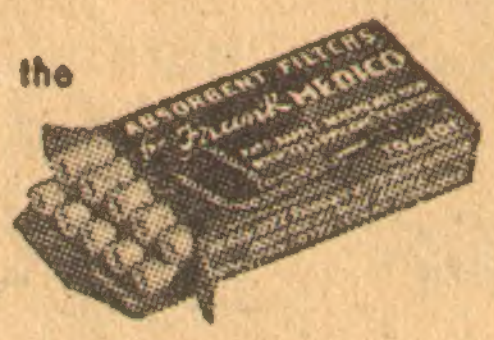

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(Continued from page 6)

natural gas from Texas to serve industry and householders on the Pacific Coast.

The 60-foot sections of pipe, 30 inches in diameter, are laid in a trench 5 feet wide and 6 to 10 feet deep. Huge earth-gouging machines dig those trenches at the rate of 25 feet per minute—which is about as fast as the first pioneers traveled across the desert wastes of New Mexico and Arizona.

Here's something else interesting about that pipeline project, which isn't whooped up like Virginia City and the silver boom, but may be important, in the long run. The job was handled by the H. C. Price Construction Company, which has done bigtime digging jobs all over the world. Boss Price, 25 years ago, ran a little tinkering shop in Bartlesville, Oklahoma. He found that pipe sections could be welded together, instead of threaded and turned, in the slow, old-fashioned way. That was the start of his career. His next job is a 1000-mile oil pipeline in Arabia.

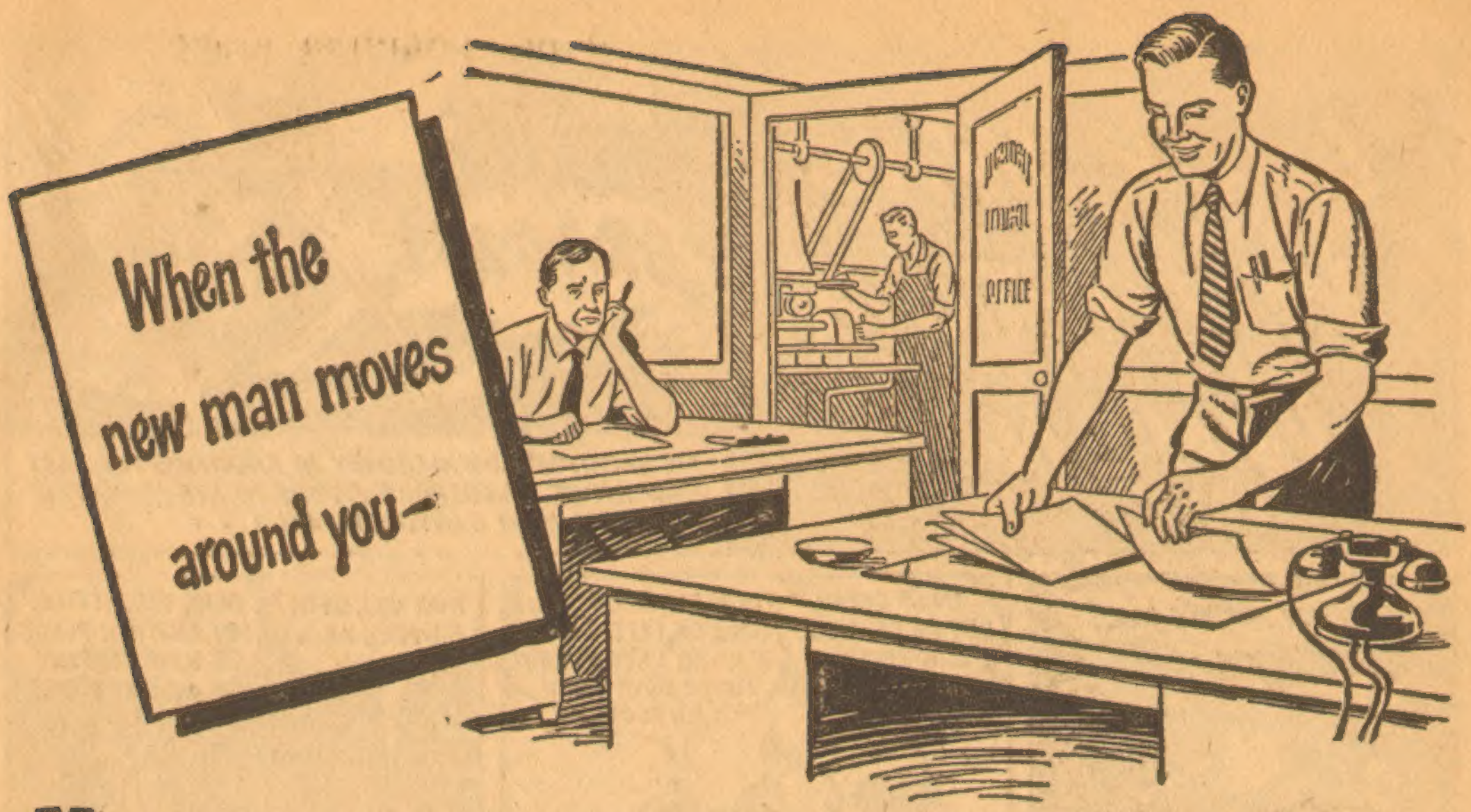
More Fishermen Than Ever!

Everywhere I go, wherever there's a pond, lake or stream, I see more fishermen than ever before. Sale of fishing licenses in the western states have about doubled since 1940. Oregon, in the 1947 vacation season, harvested over one hundred million dollars from her "tourist crop," made up largely of visiting fishermen. In Montana, 17,000 miles of streams and lakeshore, in Colorado, some 7000 miles of fishing water furnished healthy fun for thousands of folks.

I've also noticed that human ingenuity, the kind that builds pipelines and destroys crickets, has entered this oldest of sports. One of the new things is a preparation that takes the work out of digging worm bait. You put a tablespoon of this stuff in two gallons of water, spray it on the ground and the worms pop out, where you can pick 'em up.

Another gadget is a bobber for night fishing which flashes a light when a fish bites. And there's a do-funny which fits on any boat by which a man can send a boat forward rowing backwards. No more colliding with logs or bumping into landings or getting a crick in your neck by craning around to see where the boat is going.

(Continued on page 106)



You remember the day Charlie Fisher started in Factory Office. You remember his early weeks when *you* "broke him in." Today he's clearing off the old desk and moving into a job ahead of yours. You've been ten years longer with the company, and you can't understand it.

Do some realistic checking up and you'll find that Fisher has been *training* himself for the demands and responsibilities of larger positions. It isn't too late for *you* to do the same by taking an I. C. S. Shop Practice Course.

Thousands of successful Americans have acquired their all-important Shop Practice training from the world-famous International Correspondence Schools. The man who has moved around you quite possibly sent in this coupon once. *And it wouldn't be surprising if the man who employs you both is a former I. C. S. student.* Many employers are.

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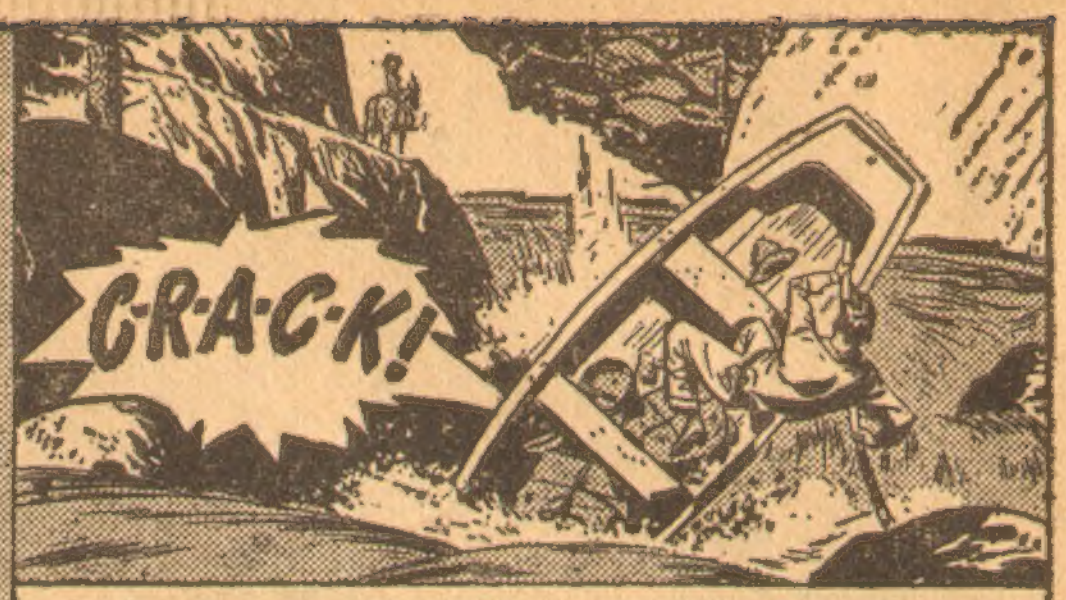

ON VACATION, TOM MAHONEY IS SHOOTING THE LAST AND MOST DANGEROUS RAPIDS IN HIS LONG TRIP THROUGH MAD CANYON. WHEN . . .

YOUR FACE LOOKS WELL GROOMED AND FEELS SWELL AFTER A SMOOTH, REFRESHING THIN GILLETTE SHAVE. MEN, THIS BLADE IS THE KEENEST AND LONGEST LASTING LOW-PRICED BLADE YOU EVER TRIED. THEN, TOO, IT FITS YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR ACCURATELY AND THUS PROTECTS YOU FROM THE IRRITATION CAUSED BY MISFIT BLADES. ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES
THIN Gillette BLADES
4 for 10¢

The gang sent shots after Hatfield and Naler (CHAP. VIII)

GUNS OF THE YELLOW HILLS

By JACKSON COLE

When the ranchers of Texas are haunted by the threat of sudden death and tragedy, the Lone Wolf Ranger rides in to pit himself against a villainous crew of evil hombres!

CHAPTER I

Careful Killers

NIGHT had just fallen over the Yellow Hills. A warm wind rustled the dry summer foliage and sudden gusts picked up dust from bare spots, to deposit a coating of fine particles on whatever was handy.

A dozen riders silently approached the small cabin nestling in the meadow between two summits. An oil lamp inside acted as a beacon, shining through a small window in the front wall by the door. "Keep it quiet," warned the burly leader

A COMPLETE JIM HATFIELD NOVEL

JIM HATFIELD READIES HIMSELF FOR A

as they drew closer. "The old goat can shoot out a squirrel's eye at a hundred yards."

The rising moon touched his hard face. Its silver glow swept the Texas country along the lower Colorado River, the stream widening and slowing down as it neared the Gulf plains.

Houston lay a day's ride eastward and a hundred miles or so to the northwest stood Austin, now capital of the Lone Star State.

There were still ranchers in the district but they were small operators, for since the Civil War the big outfits had moved or set up far to the west to avoid the crowding as farmers and crop growers came in. The beef market had been developed into a huge industry since the end of the war, and cowmen could afford to be lords of all they surveyed in the tremendous open spaces in west Texas.

An emigrant to the country, Lon Styles, sat in that one-room shack, which he had built from local timber with his own hands when he had settled his homestead. His long-booted feet were on the slab table and he had just finished his supper of beans and fried pork and coffee, cooked on his old iron stove.

He had lost his wife and children during the terrible war which had raged between brothers for four years. Hunger and privation had weakened his family and when they had fled from their plantation in Kentucky at the approach of enemy raiders, disease had claimed them, as it often did in such times.

Styles had come West with a fellow officer from the Southern armies. His friend had been a colonel of cavalry, and Styles a major. They had been boyhood comrades in the bluegrass region. His old crony, Moss Jordan, now lived not too far away.

Lon Styles was drawn and thin, but he had won in the bitter struggle with fate and had maintained his nerve, and his eyes were alert. His clothing, made up of bits of his old gray uniform and what he had managed to purchase during the years, was clean enough, but patched by a soldier's own hands. His saber hung on a wooden peg driven into the wall and the felt campaign hat with which he covered his sparse hair was on the table.

STYLES was reading a month-old newspaper sympathetic to the Lost Cause, a clandestine sheet distributed by hand to Southerners, for the carpetbaggers were only just beginning to lose their deadly grip on the South.

His Enfield rifle, one he had captured on the field of battle, was clean and loaded, in a rack in the corner. He also owned a Frontier Model Colt six-shooter and it now reposed in its holster on the bench. He had removed the heavy belt for comfort.

The old fellow's first warning of danger was the sudden kicking open of his plank door. It flew back on its leather hinges and vibrated for a moment as the bottom stuck on a high point in the board flooring. Startled, Styles brought his feet down and started to jump up but the man bulking in the doorway stopped him.

"Sit still, Styles," the man said gruffly.

Styles smelled deadly trouble. He was too shrewd a judge of men not to see that his visitor was dangerous and that there were more men of the same kind hurrying up. He waited, his pistol a few feet away from him.

"What yuh want?" he demanded. "There's some coffee left in the pot. Put her on the stove, feller. Yuh savvy my name but I don't know yores."

"Nobody else around, Dowie," reported one of the shadows outside. "All clear."

"My handle is Dowie Burke," said the tough in the door.

Styles studied him. The man had a bulldog jaw darkened by beard stubble, and black eyes smoldered deep in his skull. His mouth was twisted and under his Stetson showed curly dark hair which needed cutting.

A leather jacket and scratched chaps over blue pants tucked into run-over half-boots, a sweated shirt and red bandanna made up his apparel. At his waist rode crossed gun-belts and open holsters for the two heavy pistols.

Dowie Burke was burly and large of frame, and his hands were square and hamlike. It was obvious that he had tre-

mendous physical strength and endurance.

He just stood there, regarding old Styles who tried to dissemble. Styles wanted to get hold of his pistol and hitched his stool around but Dowie Burke said instantly:

"None of that."

"What is it?" asked Styles again.

It took nerve not to panic under Burke's threatening stare. Death was in the little cabin and Lon Styles knew it. Any instant these men would kill. He had been

over and threw him to the floor.

"Strike a match, Nifty," ordered Dowie Burke.

They righted the lamp and lighted it. The chimney had been cracked but it gave enough illumination to see Lon Styles lying there, breathing his last. Styles had kept a hold on his gun and died with it in his hand.

The men with Burke were of the same mold, dressed, as they were, in leather and Stetsons; roughs of the range. Some were

JIM HATFIELD

in too many dangerous spots not to sense it.

"Small place, but it will have to do, boys," remarked Burke coldly.

Burke's heavy right hand moved and Styles tried to save himself in a last desperate fling. He threw himself across the table and grasped his pistol. The rickety table tilted off the lamp and sent it crashing to the floor but before the light was doused Burke had drawn and fired into Styles' side. The Confederate major caught two heavy bullets in the ribs and was dying as the table turned

lean, others stout and short, but each had the expression of a man who lives in evil ways. They were armed with carbines, six-shooters, and knives.

"Jack, go tell Tynsdale to come in," commanded Dowie Burke, as he bent over Styles and began to rifle the dead man's pockets.

After a few minutes two more men pushed into the cabin.

"Send your boys outside, Dowie," ordered the man in the lead.

Burke and these two men remained in the shack and the door was closed.

Sidney Tynsdale, the man who had given Burke orders, was plainly the man's superior. He was in his middle thirties, ten years older than Dowie Burke, but it was not a matter of years. Burke looked up to Tynsdale and offered him a henchman's subservience, the attitude of a less experienced rascal toward a cleverer, more deadly one.

Tynsdale's eyes had the cold aspect of blue marbles. The flesh stretched taut over his protruding cheekbones, touched by small red blotches of broken veins that told of high living. He had a predatory nose and thin lips, and his mustache and beard were brownish in hue.

He wore riding clothes but the black leather was new and clean, unlike that of Burke and his men. His black hat had a narrow brim and his boots had recently been polished though yellowish dust clung to them. He unbuttoned his jacket and raised a fine white hand, a large diamond catching the light from the ring setting on his middle finger. He was proud of his hands although they were small for a man, feminine in their veined whiteness.

TYNSDALE sat down on the stool which Burke set straight for him, drumming sharply on the table top with two fingers of his right hand. For a moment he silently regarded Dowie Burke who shifted uneasily under the steady scrutiny.

"*Jacta est alea,*" he said then. "That means the die is cast, Burke. You have proved yourself to me."

"Yes suh." Burke nodded, and seemed relieved. "I told yuh I'd carry out any orders yuh give me."

The man in a simple black suit and hat who had entered with Tynsdale stood silently by the closed door. He was a slim man whose sharp dark face showed he was of Spanish extraction. His shoulders were bowed, his dark eyes were set in pits, and his lips curved in a gloomy expression. Yellowish hands stuck from scanty sleeves too short for the elongated arms. He had a serpentine aspect and his noiseless, alert manner accentuated the impression.

"Hold the door, Palacio," Tynsdale ordered him, nodding.

Palacio heard and obeyed, but gave no sign or word in response.

Dowie Burke knew that Felipe Palacio was Tynsdale's bodyguard and Man Friday, that Tynsdale was seldom seen without his shadow. The slimy, creepy way that Palacio moved and behaved worried Burke. It was unlike anything he had come up against and Burke had consorted with the dregs of humanity in the Southwest.

Palacio carried a stiletto as sharp as a needle, and long enough to pierce a man's body. He was never without at least two pistols, one in a shoulder holster and a small one in his coat pocket. Burke was convinced that Palacio was utterly devoted to Tynsdale and would kill at Tynsdale's slightest signal, and it made him uneasy.

Still, Burke had thrown in with Tynsdale and so Palacio should be on Burke's side of the fence. Yet Palacio's attitude was of unbending, single-minded attention to Tynsdale. His eyes burned with a fanatical glow and Burke was well aware that, while he was obsequious to the point of servility with the man who was virtually his master that he treated others with open contempt, not noticing them unless something about them concerned Tynsdale. Then Palacio was ready to spring.

The man who had owned the cabin was dead. Lon Styles was stiffening on the uneven floor. Tynsdale glanced at the corpse and murmured:

"*Caput mortuum.*"

"What's that, suh?" inquired Burke, awed and impressed by Tynsdale's superior talents.

"It means worthless remains, Dowie. You will bury them in one of the brush-choked cuts I noticed on the way here."

Tynsdale deliberately unbuttoned his black coat to get at his inside pocket. As the coat parted a heavy gold chain showed over his paunch and a solitaire diamond glinted from the fob. He brought out a case and placed spectacles on the high bridge of his nose. He drew forth a folded sheet of paper and flattened it out on the table before him, pulling the lamp closer to it.

Tynsdale's fingers rapped sharply, three little thuds with his forefingers, two with the middle. Palacio immediately turned and yanked the door open. A couple of Burke's toughs were almost against it,

The Ranger whipped up his gun and fired as the killers surged forward (CHAP. XVIII)

plainly eavesdropping.

"I want your men to stay away till we're through, Dowie," Tynsdale said to Dowie Burke.

He was not angry, but rather was pleased with his own acumen.

"Keep off, cuss yuh," growled Dowie angrily to the men outside.

They drew away and Palacio closed the door and stood before it. Burke realized then that Tynsdale's tappings had meant something, at least to Palacio.

"Look at this," ordered Tynsdale.

Burke stepped closer and saw the paper held by Tynsdale's white hand. There were several names written in a round, even fashion, each letter scrupulously formed. The first name was "Lon Styles." Tynsdale took out a jeweled pencil and then drew a careful line through Styles' name.

Dowie Burke's sullen lips moved as he read the next name. It was "Moss Jordan —Nod Hill Farm."

There were more names below that of Jordan.

Burke waited and Tynsdale explained.

"These are the men who are in my way, Dowie. You've proved yourself to me by getting rid of Styles. Go on from here. You can use this place as a headquarters while you operate in the vicinity. Keep my name out of it, of course. I have money for you tonight and you'll be well paid as we go along, with a big bonus at the end. Be careful. Work quietly so the law won't interfere. We can handle the county sheriff and local officers but we want to skip the Rangers if we can."

Tynsdale had a map of the Yellow Hills country and gave precise and valuable instructions to Dowie Burke. He paid Burke with a bag of money. When Tynsdale had finished he took off his spectacles and a smile deepened the creases about his eyes.

"*Decrevi*—I have decreed, Dowie," he murmured.

"Yes, suh. Yuh'll find I do things to suit yuh."

Burke put the folded list in his shirt pocket and fastened the button.

Tynsdale rose and Palacio tensed the way a dog does when its master moves. The two went out and rode away, leaving Dowie Burke and his men at Styles' cabin.

CHAPTER II

Buzzards In The Sky

BEN NALER, virile young cowman from the trans-Pecos, felt his heart lilt with happy anticipation as he rode up and dismounted in front of Moss Jordan's ranchhouse. Naler was a tall and sinewy young fellow with curly, copper-colored hair, and uncommonly straight-looking blue eyes. His skin, cleanly shaven, was bronzed from sun and wind of the wilderness. He had put on a new blue shirt and a clean bandanna before leaving Stuart's Ford, the little town on the river where he had taken a room.

Naler dropped his reins, and his long legs, clad in chaps, blue pants, and half-boots with silver spurs, took him slowly toward the shaded veranda of the house. Out back were long stables and corrals. In them were the beautiful Kentucky horses which had first brought him to Moss Jordan's place.

Naler had come then from his big ranch to buy blooded stock with which he hoped to improve the mustang breed of his own mounts. Left to themselves, mustangs grew scrawny and smaller as they ran in a wild state. Tough as they might be they needed more size.

There were a couple of men working around the stables but Naler did not see Moss Jordan there. He gave a whistle and halloa and presently Jordan came through the house and outside.

"Why, howdy, Naler," he greeted.

Jordan, a wiry man of medium height, strong and active, had been a Confederate cavalry officer and had fought under such famous Southern generals as Stonewall Jackson and Jeb Stuart. He had been wounded twice in action. After the War he had taken the oath of allegiance to the United States as the law had required all ex-Confederate officers to do, but had promptly left his impoverished Kentucky plantation and emigrated to Texas, where he had settled on the Colorado among the Yellow Hills.

He had saved a few stallions and mares of the fine strain his family had owned and brought them to Texas, where he hoped

to build up a big horse farm. But as yet he had none for sale, and when Ben Naler had first approached him, he had refused to let any go. He was trying to get a backlog of breeders before he cashed in on excess stock.

It was three days since Naler had made his first visit, and the young cowman felt self-conscious in Jordan's presence. He wondered if Moss Jordan could see through him.

"I come back, Mr. Jordan," he said. "Figgered yuh might have changed yore mind about the hosses."

Jordan's thick, graying eyebrows drew together, and his sharp face took on lines indicative of a peppery disposition. That was emphasized by his quick way of talking. His career as a colonel had given him a habit of command, and he could judge a man. Keen gray eyes now fixed Naler who shifted a bit.

"Why no, son," Jordan said, with deceptive mildness. "I ain't changed my mind. I told yuh I wanted to build up my string before I sell any hosses. Mebbe in a year or two I could let yuh have some."

Moss Jordan's bearded face was set. Naler dropped his gaze, feeling embarrassed. But he looked up quickly as a girl's voice called: "Why, hello, Mr. Naler. You back so soon?"

In the front doorway stood smiling Connie Jordan, Moss' daughter, whose golden hair and amber eyes held a magic for men. She was small but exquisitely formed—and she was the real reason why Ben Naler had been drawn back to Jordan's.

Naler felt all hands and feet, as awkward as a scarecrow. He was confused, as he thought that both Connie and Moss would guess why he had returned. Jordan had been positive in his refusal to sell any horses, and nobody but a fool would have come again so soon.

But Jordan had not banked on Connie. A widower who had lost his wife during the awful war, he took the girl more or less for granted. Connie kept house for her father and his two aides.

Just as Naler thought he would melt into the ground with embarrassment, Connie came to his rescue.

"Come on in and stay for dinner, Mr. Naler," she invited cordially.

"Yes, ma'am." Naler was glad to pass Moss who was still watching him.

Jordan scratched his head. "Oh," he said. "I'll be there in a jiffy, Connie." He went on around the house.

The house was small but comfortably furnished and there were the signs of a woman's influence all around—in the curtains at the window, the flowers on the table and the cleanliness. The odor of the food was appetizing, too. Naler, a young bachelor, lived alone in his cow kingdom and it was just such things that brought him to a realization of what he was missing. And there was, of course, Connie herself.

"I wish yuh'd make it Ben, ma'am," he told her, as he took off his hat inside.

"All right, Ben," she said lightly. "And I'm Connie, you know. Excuse me while I see to the roast. I don't want it to burn."

IN A LITTLE while Naler ate with the Jordans and the two hands. The meal was excellent, with home-baked bread and freshly churned butter. But Ben Naler was hardly aware of anything except the proximity of the girl. He had been ceaselessly thinking about her since he had met her and had been unable to rest until he got back to her.

One of Jordan's hired men was a smiling, young fellow, and Naler watched him jealously, wondering if Connie and he might be interested in one another. Connie smiled at them all.

"I'm worried, mighty worried," Jordan was saying when the meal was drawing to a close. "What do yuh say we ride over to Lon's after dinner, Connie?"

"All right," she agreed. "It's a nice day. Just the same you oughtn't to be worried about Uncle Lon, Dad. You know how he is. He probably was too busy to ride over yesterday."

"He knew we'd have chicken and dumplin's for dinner," insisted her father. "He never failed to come on Sunday before."

"What's wrong?" asked Naler, for a moment withdrawing his attention from the girl.

"Oh, an old friend of father's named Lon Styles usually comes to Sunday dinner," Connie explained. "They play checkers and fight the War over again. He didn't show up yesterday."

Naler paid scant attention. He was in a thrall of enchantment with Connie pres-

ent. He was relieved when the young hired man went out, back to work at the stables. He helped Connie clean up and she smiled at him and seemed pleased and decidedly friendly.

Moss Jordan had his own and Connie's horse saddled when Naler and the girl left the kitchen.

"Let's ride," sang out Jordan.

Connie changed her clothes and came out wearing a brown riding dress and a short-sleeved knitted jacket. She had a small hat on her golden hair. She was breathtakingly beautiful, thought Naler.

Moss Jordan rode ahead, crossing the river on a narrow wooden bridge and taking a trail into the brushy hills. Naler rode beside Connie and answered her questions. She was keenly interested in ranching.

"I wish father would move out there where you are," she said. "It must be wonderful."

"It's nice in some ways," agreed Naler. "But it's mighty lonesome at times." He flushed a bit as he realized what he had said and wondered if Connie would think he was bold. "I mean there ain't many neighbors like around here, ma'am. Yuh go it alone out there." He was eager to appear before her in the best light, for he felt humble before her beauty.

The sun was warm. As they climbed the slanting, rocky trail, the hoofs of the horses kicked up yellowish dust. But the time sped much too fast to suit Ben Naler, in Connie's company and though it was several miles to Styles' place, they sighted it too soon to suit Naler. And as they saw the shack nestling between the hills, they saw some saddle horses outside it.

"Huh—looks like he's got visitors," said Jordan, surprised.

Several men stood around outside the cabin watching them as they approached. One of them stepped forward to greet them as they drew rein. He was a tough-looking fellow, thought Ben Naler. He had a bulldog jaw and hot black eyes, and Colts rode in his oiled holsters. Naler had had experience with rustlers and fugitives from justice who swarmed in the lawless land across the Pecos and he would have said at once that the burly man was dangerous, if not outlaw.

"Well, what can I do for yuh?" demanded the heavy-set stranger.

"Where's Lon Styles?" asked Jordan. "I'm a pard of his. Missed him when he didn't show up yesterday at my place."

"Oh. Yuh're a friend of Styles, huh?"

Naler didn't fancy the sneering attitude of the heavy-set man. He was angry but he only watched, allowing Jordan to handle the situation.

Jordan's eyes narrowed. "Where is Styles?" he said shortly.

The thickness in the air could fairly be felt. Then the burly man broke the silence.

"He's my uncle," he said, more politely. "My handle is Burke. I'm Styles' nephew and come for a visit. Yuh see he wanted to take a run to New Orleans so he done left me in charge here while he's away."

Naler had an eye on the armed toughs slouched against the house wall. Burke watched Jordan, who was scowling.

"I'm Moss Jordan, Burke," the former Kentuckian said. "Styles and I are like brothers. I never heard him speak of yuh."

"Yuh ain't callin' me a liar, I hope?" Burke said softly.

Connie was alarmed. Moss Jordan had a quick fighting temper and it was flaring up. She edged her horse close to her father's and put a hand on his arm.

"Oh, Father, your memory's terrible," she cried brightly. "I remember Uncle Lon speaking of Mr. Burke . . . It's late. We've got to get on home."

"Huh." Jordan set his jaw, but as Connie pulled at him he wheeled his mount and started off.

NALER and Connie followed and they left the cabin behind, Burke and his friends eying them until they had turned around the bluff.

Then Moss exploded. "What do yuh make of that!"

"What's wrong?" inquired Naler.

"Why, that feller's no relation of Lon's," said Jordan.

"Father, that man's dangerous!" broke in Connie.

Both were distressed and Naler sympathized. It was a mystery, and Jordan swore he would clear it up.

They took the trail for home, over the hill. A couple of miles from Styles' cabin Naler spoke of something which his keen

sight had noted for some time. He had a far-seeing eye and an attention for details which came from his life in the wilderness.

"Buzzards over there, Mr. Jordan."

Specks wheeled and dropped from the azure sky. Moss Jordan thought enough of it to leave the trail in spite of Connie's fears. Naler and the girl followed and after about a mile of twisting in and out over rocky terrain spotted with clumps of woods and bush, they reached the point where Naler had spied the vultures. The big birds flew up, screeching at the interruption, and growls and yelps sounded as a pack of mongrel dogs bristled and snarled at them.

Jordan drew his pistol and cocked it, firing a shot. The animals turned and fled, yelping.

"They're bad as wolves," explained Moss. "They come from homeless dogs durin' the War and they've gone wild. Tear yuh to pieces if they get yuh down."

Up the cut they found what they were hunting. It was the body of Lon Styles, Jordan's old friend. The buzzards and dogs had worried and dug it out of the yellow dirt where Styles had been buried under loose earth and rocks.

Moss Jordan was deeply saddened. He knelt by the remains of his crony, mourning for Styles.

"Poor Lon! Cuss it, he had a lonely life of it. Lost his folks in the war, and now he's gone!"

Naler was more practical, for he did not have the personal sense of bereavement.

"Somebody shot him through the ribs, Mr. Jordan," he pointed out. "Then they brought the body out and buried it here."

Something plugged into the earth not a foot from Moss Jordan, and Connie gave a quick scream.

"Come on—that was a heavy rifle bullet!" cried Naler.

He grasped Connie and lifted her to her saddle, then helped Jordan up. Moss Jordan was furious.

"I'll go back there and have it out with that Burke rascal!" he howled.

"Look, there's a dozen of 'em comin'," said the cooler Naler. "And we got Connie along."

The burly man they had met at Styles' cabin was indeed coming at them, with his followers.

Hatfield closed his fingers on the gun wrist so the Colt could not be fired (CHAP. IV)

"Up that way—hustle!" ordered Naler, indicating a path around the cut which would take them around the rise and put some protection between them and Burke. "Take care of Connie!"

He dropped back, Colt in hand, turned in his saddle and began firing at Burke who was working the rifle. He could hear the singing slugs in the air and a couple kicked up shale and dirt too close for comfort.

Naler slowly retreated around the bend. He could see Moss Jordan and the girl riding down a long slope which would eventually bring them to safety. He went on for a time and again swung to blast the turn as Burke and his toughs pushed up.

Fighting a clever delaying action, Ben Naler gave his friends time to escape. Then Moss Jordan dropped back, when Connie was well out ahead, and sent bullets at the enemy.

Burke was dogged, though, and evidently infuriated because they had uncovered Styles' body. He kept pressing after them, hoping to pick off Naler and Jordan. Then he would capture the girl!

CHAPTER III

Texas Calls

CAPTAIN WILLIAM McDOWELL, Chief of Texas Rangers at Austin, paced his office floor with the same equanimity a freshly caged tiger might display. Not that McDowell would literally bite any hand thrust too close, but he did feel like it.

This was due to a combination of circumstances, all of which had long annoyed the old officer. And superimposed on the festering sores of the past years had come a new call from Texas to the Rangers for help. The wire had reached McDowell that morning and it was from a point not a hundred miles southeast of the capital.

"That's gettin' plumb close to home," thought McDowell irately.

Bill McDowell had been a star Ranger in his younger days and had brought in or left lying more than his share of outlaws, Indians and other enemies of the Lone Star State. He still stood six feet but he was partially crippled with the ills of old age and could no longer leap to his mustang and be off to the wars.

He was too valuable a man to be retired, however, with his shrewd understanding of human nature and the particular problems of Texas. So from his Austin headquarters, McDowell was responsible for law enforcement in vast areas and he managed it with a handful of men. Even though Texas, impoverished by the Civil War, was a gigantic problem, since the state was just beginning to heave her mighty self out of the mire of defeat and the carpetbagger regime.

Though he could not answer this touching appeal himself there was more than one way to skin a cougar in the old Ranger Captain's opinion. McDowell had come to his decision and as usual he acted at once upon it. He happened to be across the room from his desk where his call bell stood but he was pulling on a cold pipe. He took it from his clenched teeth and hurled it at the bell, making a bull's-eye, since he was an excellent shot with any variety of weapon.

A clerk with the startled look of a surprised rabbit peeked in the door.

"Send Ranger Hatfield in!" roared McDowell. "Then go out and buy me a new pipe. These newfangled ones don't last a man any time at all. Look at that! It busted into four pieces."

He kicked the broken pipe under the desk and folded his arms, staring out the window and trying to contain himself. Then he heard a soft step and a pleasant, drawling voice said:

"Good mornin', Cap'n Bill."

McDowell turned. It was always a comfort to see Jim Hatfield, his greatest Ranger.

Hatfield impressed the beholder at once. He stood well over six feet, with long, powerful legs cased in leather riding pants. His shoulders pushed out the dark shirt he wore and his body tapered to the narrow hips of the lithe fighting man. Here depended the big Colt revolvers in supple holsters equipped with rawhide thongs to hold them in position when riding or running.

Hatfield was too rugged to be called handsome. That was a weak word to de-

scribe the leashed might and rippling strength in him. The sun and winds of the wild trails had bronzed him a golden hue. The strap of his big Stetson was loose in the runner and framed his determined jaw. Though he carried himself easily, now in repose, those slender hands could draw and fire the Colts with stunning speed. His gray-green eyes, so lazy, in anger could grow as cold as dark ice. His wide mouth broke the severity of his face.

McDowell knew that Jim Hatfield had an unbreakable nerve in battle, the hickory and coiled lightning and skill to back it up. And to make Hatfield practically indispensable to McDowell and the State the tall officer had a quick mind which could size up and accurately judge a situation.

Some men were clever but did not have the physical stamina to win; others had brute strength and a ruthless bull way of boring in but made mistakes in strategy and tactics. But Jim Hatfield, modest as his manner was, possessed both brains and fighting ability of the first caliber.

"Sit down," ordered McDowell, and Hatfield complied.

Blue clouds of tobacco smoke idled from the quirly he was smoking as he listened to McDowell.

THE captain spread the telegram that had so disturbed him before the Ranger. Hatfield could read it at a glance but McDowell felt impelled to talk it out:

"Signed Colonel Moss Jordan," he said. "I think he fought under Jeb Stuart and mebbe Jackson too. Anyway I'm sick of the way ex-officers of the Confederacy been put upon even when they done took the oath. There's been a killin' in the Yellow Hills, not a hundred miles southeast of here on the Colorado."

Hatfield nodded. He knew something of the section under discussion, for he had passed through it on his way to the Gulf Coast. Austin itself stood on the upper Colorado.

"Goldy and I can make it in a day, suh," Hatfield said.

"*Bueno.* I think yuh better hurry. The killin' was that of Major Lon Styles and yuh see Jordan says Styles was an old Army pard. Look around careful, Hatfield. Texas is just beginnin' to rid herself of the carpetbaggers who have persecuted these former Confederates.

"Styles is dead, but yuh might be able to save Jordan and others. Jordan seems to think he's in danger of death and evidently there's a tough bunch operatin' in his vicinity. 'Dowie Burke.' I think I had complaints on an hombre with that handle from the Border and other parts."

Hatfield memorized what information McDowell had for him. He could smell danger and sense the urgency of Jordan's appeal to the Rangers. The killers were after Moss Jordan and even now he might be finished, before Hatfield could make it. The big map of Texas on the office wall showed that a small settlement called Stuart's Ford was the nearest town to Jordan's place.

The Ranger was glad to be moving. He did not like cities but preferred the lonely wilderness trails and the thrills brought by conflict with enemies of the State. McDowell shook hands and wished him luck and the old Captain meant it.

"I don't know what I'd do if he didn't come back from a job," mused McDowell, as he watched the big Ranger approach the magnificent golden sorrel awaiting him outside.

Goldy was Hatfield's friend and partner. The gelding had wonderful endurance and strength, a speed which had carried Hatfield out of many ticklish situations. A carbine rode in a sling under one long leg of the mighty rider as Hatfield mounted and turned to wave goodby from the saddle.

The Colts rode at Hatfield's bunched hips and he had spare shells in the belt loops. He carried extra ammunition, iron rations, water, and at the cantle was a neat roll containing a poncho, blanket and a few more necessities. He could live off the country if need be and so was not limited in his maneuvers. . . .

The following afternoon found Hatfield in Stuart's Ford. The sleepy little settlement reposed on the south bank of the Colorado. It was vital that the sorrel have rest and a real feed, and besides the Ranger desired to check up on the town and get information as to the exact location of Moss Jordan's. Also there might be gossip as to Styles' death and the killers who had descended on the section.

Hatfield first saw to Goldy's needs and after a rubdown and a small drink for the

sorrel he left his mount in a corral behind the livery stable.

He walked up the awning-shaded way. A glance completely took in Stuart's Ford. Main Street was the one real street, running on both sides of the plaza. There was a general store called Hillary's, three saloons, one of good size and advertising rooms to rent. There was also a blacksmith shop, the livery, a hardware store specializing in firearms and ammunition, and few more buildings made up the place.

Stuart's Ford had a shabby but virtuous air as though it had settled for a nap in the warm sunshine by the river and did not desire to be disturbed. Such a spot might boast a day constable and a night watchman, but for real law enforcement must depend on a county sheriff. As many of these encumbents at the time had been placed in office by the carpetbaggers who had taken advantage of the disfranchised Texans, it was a tossup whether the sheriff would be a help or a hindrance. In any case, the county seat was twenty miles away.

There were a few saddle horses as well as farm wagons standing at the railings separating the sidewalks from the yellow street. This was a mixed community of small ranches, farms and homes nestling in the Yellow Hills. There were no really big cowmen such as governed the empire of the Trans-Pecos and south Texas but their people were citizens of the Lone Star commonwealth and entitled to protection.

LOW hills were covered with brush and patches of woods. The Colorado valley cut through these with innumerable nicks and indentations, made at a time long ago when the stream was wild and jumped its banks with regularity.

The Gulf lay a day's ride farther east, with the rapidly growing city of Houston east by north. Where the Gulf plains began so did the cotton growing, but around the Yellow Hills there were no such plantations.

Hatfield was hungry, thirsty and tired. He strode to the largest of the saloons which rented rooms, the Palace Hotel & Bar. He had a drink, ordered a meal and paid for a bed.

It was a feat to enter a strange town and get any real information, but the Ranger was trained at such work. He did not show any curiosity but began chatting with the barkeeper at the Palace. There were a few customers down the bar. Before long, without his informant suspecting what he was after, Hatfield knew the exact location of Moss Jordan's place, where Lon Styles had lived and what the town thought about it all.

He did not wish to move, however, until Goldy was rested. A jaded horse might spell ruin and death. So the Ranger ate his hot meal and though it was broad daylight went upstairs to the bare little cubicle which contained a cot and a table. He lay down and slept. . . .

Night had fallen when the tall Ranger quietly saddled Goldy and set out for Jordan's place. There was a road meandering through the river valley, skirting natural obstructions above high-water mark. Jordan's was said to be on the same side as Stuart's Ford, while Lon Styles had dwelt north of the stream.

The Yellow Hills loomed about him, their summits touched by the rising moon. It had cooled at bit with the setting of the sun but it was still warm. He could hear the slow murmur of the Colorado to his right and occasionally see a stretch of the silvery water. As he moved upriver he sighted here and there the small lights of some habitation.

His imagination carried him inside these homes. There would be men and women, and children. Supper would be over and they would be resting after the day's labor, peaceful and snug at home. At night all houses looked inviting, cozy, mused Hatfield.

The west wind puffed dust into his eyes and he turned his chin down and shook his head. Goldy had brought him well away from the settlement and the Ranger, cleaning his eyes of particles, looked ahead once again. He sighted lighted windows in the river valley some distance on. The road hugged an undercut cliff and he was against its darkness.

The golden sorrel shivered and slowed without any knee pressure. He sniffed softly, giving warning to his rider.

Immediately Hatfield drew up and sat his saddle with ear cocked. Goldy had told him that someone or something was moving up there, and natural caution kept

the Ranger from blundering on in the darkness.

CHAPTER IV

Surprise for a Drygulcher

HATFIELD waited, as patient as Fate. But he knew that the animal senses of his horse were keener than any man's could be, and that some scent had reached Goldy's flared nostrils, brought on the warm wind.

At last he was rewarded as he caught the sounds of splashing. They came from the river and were upstream. He decided that men must be crossing the Colorado from the north bank.

He moved on a bit, hunting a possible niche in the cliff into which to retire in case they came his way. Again he pulled up, pressing back and freezing. The horsemen were coming up the slope onto the road and he saw a cigarette glow ruby red in a man's mouth as the smoker dragged on it. Voices reached him.

"Douse that quirly and keep shut," an irritated command was snapped out. "Yuh want Jordan to savvy yuh're comin'?"

The cigarette was put out after a final inhalation. The dark figures swung up the river road away from the Ranger. He was not certain how many were in the party but he guessed ten or a dozen. Allowing them a lead he followed in the dust kicked up by the trotting horses.

The mention of Jordan had alerted the Ranger. The colonel who had sent his complaint to McDowell had mentioned that he was in personal danger.

They left their horses some distance out from a lighted house which Hatfield was certain was Moss Jordan's home. He could see two windows in front, a couple more at the side. Two holders were left with the mustangs to keep them quiet as the others started quietly toward Jordan's.

The Ranger dismounted and patted Goldy's neck. The sorrel would stand and wait in the shadows of the brush clump until Hatfield whistled or came for him.

Expert as an Apache Indian at such work, the tall officer flitted in. He circled the spot where the mustangs restlessly pawed and sniffed, and heard the low talk of the holders. It was too dark to see much of the surroundings, but Hatfield could make out that the area about the buildings was cleared but that there were patches of woods and brush not far away. The stealthy attackers used this cover as they crept forward.

Hatfield was flat against the earth from time to time, listening intently. He could hear men moving in a small grove of trees to his left. He could not see them at all now and the faint noises seemed thin for so many men so he froze behind a jutting tongue of rock, a great boulder half buried in the earth.

The progress of someone in the woods was checked and then resumed. Hatfield caught a few words.

"They got a sentry on the porch, Dowie," a man was reporting. "I seen his gun barrel when he shifted."

Hatfield decided that the main bunch had waited while a scout went to the edge of the woods to spy on Jordan's. "Dowie" could well be Dowie Burke, the outlaw

[*Turn page*]

TOPS FOR QUALITY

BIGGER AND BETTER

named in the complaint.

Another speaker's voice reached the keen ears of the Texas Ranger. He thought it the same as the gruff one which had cautioned the riders back on the road.

"Give me that new Sharps," ordered the hidden man. "I'm goin' to crawl over to that rock and lie there and see what I can hit. If they got a guard out there's no chance of rushin' in, but mebbe I can pick off Jordan and Naler. You boys stick here and keep it quiet. Cover me."

Hatfield lay squeezed against the opposite side of the rock. He could hear the creeping enemy crossing from the woods to the boulder. He was ready, but the man stopped on the near edge of the rock and set himself there.

The Ranger sought to control his breathing. It seemed to him that it must be extra loud but he could not hear the fellow on the other side, except when the latter moved himself. By raising his eyes Hatfield could see the side windows. Through one showed an oil lamp burning on the table and a woman's figure passed between the window and light. Then a man went by, moving in the front of the house.

Hatfield heard the throaty *cluck-cluck* of the cocking Sharps. A man again was silhouetted against that light now and paused at the table to pick up something, a newspaper or magazine. This made that person inside a sitting duck target for an expert marksman, and Hatfield gathered himself to spring.

The lithe Ranger vaulted the boulder and landed with both feet in the small of the back of the prostrate drygulcher there. The Sharps went off with a deafening roar and glass tinkled. A woman inside the house screamed shrilly in terror and a man began shouting.

HATFIELD had wrecked the drygulcher's aim but he quickly found he had caught a Tartar. The man's heavy rifle barrel slashed at him and nearly cracked his left forearm as the fellow cursed frantically. The Ranger slipped his vise grip to the warm steel of the barrel and with a wrench ripped the Sharps away and flung it aside. But in this moment his enemy got to his knees and slugged him in the solar plexus with a terrific punch.

It was a paralyzing blow and the Ranger nearly lost his life as the killer whipped out a Colt and threw it up. But with a superhuman effort Jim Hatfield threw himself forward. The pistol roared in his ear and he felt the burn of flashing powder against his cheek. The bullet missed him by a breath and with all his skill the Ranger slid a hand from the gun wrist and closed his fingers on the cylinder. The Colt could not be fired again while he held on.

He brought up a knee and his adversary grunted in pain. Hatfield's ears still rang with the explosion of the gun and his heart pumped blood at a frantic rate, making his ears hum. He was dimly aware of yells and calls from both house and the woods where this killer had left his companions. But such things were only vague, for Hatfield was totally engrossed in the conflict.

He bored in and the bending of his foe's arm forced the man to let go of the Colt and try to turn so his bone would not be snapped by the pressure. Suddenly the man under him fell back and carried the tall officer along with him. Hatfield landed on top but was slugged in the nose with such force that his eyes watered.

Grunts, curses and whistling breath told him that the drygulcher was in as bad if not worse condition than he was himself, as Hatfield slowly but surely gained the upper hand. Actually only seconds had elapsed since he had jumped his man, but it seemed they had been battling a long time.

The noises in his ears abated and so did the shock of the first clash. Hatfield heard men in the trees calling:

"Dowie! Dowie! What's wrong? Come on!"

A gunshot banged from the direction of the house as the sentry let one go at the noises and the spot where he had seen the Sharps flame. A bullet whizzed over Hatfield and Dowie as they struggled on the sandy dirt.

Hatfield was bringing his right fist up and down with the sturdy insistence of a triphammer, landing on Dowie's face each time and trying to hold the man down with his weight and his left arm. Dowie was as slippery as a greased pig, and he could take a lot of punishment. He never quit struggling and he began to shriek:

"This way, boys! This way!"

The Ranger was aware of a rush from the woods. The riders who had come here with Dowie were entering the fight. It would mean death. He was sure Dowie had another gun in his holsters, and he wanted to disable the man enough so that Dowie could not kill him when he turned. He quit punching Dowie and got a grip on Dowie's shirt front, meaning to throw him over.

Heavy as Dowie was, the Ranger picked him off the earth and started to hurl him away. But the shirt front was rotted and ripped in the Ranger's grip. The whip of it sent Dowie reeling toward his followers who had almost reached him, but dared not fire into the melee for fear of killing their leader.

The sudden release of Dowie's weight sent Hatfield staggering back and his heels caught in a low rock shelf. He fell back, bruised against the sharp side of the boulder, but still unconsciously holding most of Dowie's shirt front in his hand.

Dark figures were dashing at him from the woods. Dowie was rolling over and over toward the oncoming men and yelling to them at the top of his lungs:

"Kill him! Kill that hombre over there, boys!"

Revolvers blared and lead spattered against the stone. Hatfield flipped himself around and scrabbled over the top of the big rock. He dropped the cloth he had been gripping as though for dear life and drew a Colt.

He would have shot Dowie then but the others were around their chief. Dowie was frantically trying to tell them what had occurred and pointing at the boulder. Bullets hunted for the tall Ranger as he crouched behind his shield. He bobbed up to shoot and his bullets sent them streaking back into the woods, Dowie with them. But one man threw up his hands and crashed with a howl before he could reach shelter.

THE Ranger dusted the brush, his lead spaced in the trees. He was breathing hard from exertion and his back and arm hurt. He tried to judge where they were by the cracklings made as they retreated toward their mustangs, but gunfire opened behind him. Men from the house had circled and the light in the building had been put out.

A bullet smacked into the rock on Hatfield's side, sent by the very men he had come to help. They could not distinguish friend from foe in the night and were excited by the attempted drygulching.

"Hold it, Jordan!" bawled the Ranger, edging to the side of the rocks.

A hard and determined voice answered him.

"Who's that? Speak up or I'll blow yore head off."

"Don't shoot!" called the Ranger. "I'm a friend!"

"Yeah?" replied the voice, a sarcastic note in it. "Do friends shoot an hombre through the window?"

There was no more shooting from the woods. Dowie and his men had fled except for the silent figure lying face down a few yards from the trees.

"I didn't fire that shot," argued Hatfield. "Listen and yuh'll hear Dowie and his boys ridin' off. It was Dowie tried to drygulch yuh and I stopped him."

There was a silence. The Ranger, crouched by the boulder, could hear men all around him, aware each had a bead on him. The beat of retreating hoofs helped win the argument for the Ranger.

"If yuh're a friend come out with yore hands reachin'!" another voice called. "Steady, now."

"Here I come!" the officer called back.

He stood up and put up his hands, slowly walking into the open space. He had made about twenty paces when the hard voice ordered:

"Now stop and let us have a look at yuh."

Hatfield complied. A man rose from behind his elbow and came carefully closer, a carbine raised and cocked. The Ranger could see him out of the corner of his eye. He was a tall, lean fellow. A shorter figure jumped up at Hatfield's left and bored in, covering him.

"All right, Naler," said the second man who had spoken. There was a commanding ring in his voice. "Get in behind him and lift his guns."

As the tall man moved nearer Hatfield now could see a couple more armed aides.

"Yuh're losin' time," Hatfield assured. "Dowie and his men are way off by now. Are you Moss Jordan?"

"What yuh want with him?" the smaller man asked suspiciously.

"I come out to talk with Moss Jordan," explained the Ranger. "Yuh savvy Cap'n McDowell? I bumped into a dozen dry-gulchers and trailed 'em here. Had a scrap with one who tried for yuh from this rock when yuh showed in front of the light."

CHAPTER V

Death List

EVIDENTLY the tall man was Naler, for it was he who came up behind the Ranger and snatched the Colts from his holsters. Hatfield let his guns go for he had a spare hidden under his shirt, and he knew he must identify himself to these men anyway.

The mention of McDowell impressed the man who must be Moss Jordan.

"McDowell!" he exclaimed. "Yuh mean yuh're from Austin?"

"Yes suh."

"I'm Moss Jordan," the horse rancher said promptly. "Well, come on into the house and we'll talk it over."

"Better check up outside first, Jordan," advised Hatfield. "I shot one of 'em when they run for the woods."

"Rob, fetch a lantern!" ordered Jordan.

One of the men padded toward the barn.

"Father!" a woman's voice filled with anxiety called. "Ben! Are you all right?"

"Yeah, we're fine!" shouted back Moss Jordan.

Presently Rob brought a lighted lantern. The yellow rays showed the mighty Ranger's rugged features, his size, and his fighting look. He was bruised and his clothing dirty from the set-to with Dowie, but Moss Jordan gave a quick whistle at sight of him.

"They didn't spare the materials when they made yuh, did they, mister?"

Hatfield nodded. He was used to comments on his size. He lowered his hands.

"Could we have a word in private, Jordan?" he said. "Send yore men away a bit."

Jordan nodded and waved the other three men off.

"I'm reachin' for my badge, Jordan," Hatfield said in a low voice. From its secret pocket he extracted the silver star on silver circle, emblem of the Texas Rangers and a sign to conjure with. "We had yore complaint and I come in answer to it."

"Bueno," said Moss Jordan. "Glad yuh're here, Ranger. But it looks like it would take more than one officer to settle the hash of Dowie Burke and his gang."

Studying Moss Jordan, the Ranger decided that the former confederate colonel was over fifty. He was wiry and of medium height. Bushy, graying brows joined over alert gray eyes, and he had a sharp face and a peppery manner. He was now wearing dark pants and shirt.

"I like to work on the q.t. till I see what's what, Jordan," explained the Ranger.

"Yuh can trust those three," said Jordan, nodding toward the men who had withdrawn to one side. "Rob and Hank are my own men and the big hombre is Ben Naler, as square a young galoot as yuh'll ever meet. He's from across the Pecos and a visitor, but he's stayed to help in this fight. Burke and his gunslingers, I'm convinced, killed an old friend of mine named Styles. This is the second time they've tried for us, not countin' once when we found Styles' corpse in the monte and they chased us home. They were here last week but Naler was on guard and we beat 'em off."

"Let's see what we got over here," suggested Hatfield.

Jordan picked up the lantern and they went over to the silent figure lying near the dark woods. Hatfield rolled the body over. The Ranger slug had caught the killer in the back of the skull.

"I seen him over at Styles'," offered Moss Jordan. "He's one of Burke's crew. They took over at Styles' after killin' Lon but when we found the body and complained to the county sheriff they hid out in the Yellow Hills. Sheriff come over and smelled around but after a couple of days huntin' he gave up and went off on another call. He ain't too sympathetic with me anyway. I fought under Stonewall Jackson and Jeb Stuart, yuh see, and the sheriff was put in by the carpetbaggers two years ago."

"I savvy."

Rob, Hank and Ben Naler joined them

and stood around staring at the dead man. The light showed Naler as stalwart, and nearly as tall as the Ranger, a cowman by all signs. Hatfield liked Naler's looks, the bronzed young face and clear eyes. He liked the soft way Naler had of talking when he was not on the prod. He could speak out when need be, but otherwise saved his breath. The coppery hair on his well-shaped head was curly, and his eyes looked at a man squarely. He appeared to be quick with a pistol and all in all a valuable friend to have around.

Hank was young and smiling. Rob was older and silent, and a tobacco cud thrust out one leathery cheek.

"I'll get a shovel, boss," suggested Hank, "and we'll bury this lobo where he lies."

JORDAN nodded, turning back with Hatfield.

"I'll tell yuh all we savvy," said the colonel. "But first let's go inside and have a drink. If yuh're hungry, Ranger, my daughter will shake yuh up a meal."

"I could do with a drink but I ate in town, thanks just the same."

Jordan carried the lantern as they went back toward the house. They passed close to the rock where Hatfield had had his match with Dowie Burke and the circle of yellow light showed the dark piece of shirt which Hatfield had ripped from Burke.

"Wait a jiffy, Jordan," said the Ranger, turning. "Fetch the light closer."

He stooped and picked up the sweated cloth. The flap of the breast pocket was open as the button had been pulled from its moorings, and Hatfield glimpsed edges of a sheet of white paper sticking out. He drew it forth and unfolded it, holding it to the lantern so he could see what it was.

Moss Jordan looked over his shoulder as he bent to read the words inscribed on the paper. There were several names on it, headed by that of Lon Styles. A line had been drawn through Styles' name. The second on the list was that of Moss Jordan.

"Yuh savvy who all these folks are?" inquired Hatfield, his gray-green eyes gleaming as he looked around at Jordan.

"Shore. Styles is dead. I'm next. The third is John Phelps, a neighbor across the river. He's got a farm runnin' back from the valley. Lives there with his wife and four kids. The fourth is Sam Olliphant, up the line from me. He's owner of a small ranch." Moss Jordan knew the people on the list. "They're all decent folks, Hatfield, and they all live within fifteen miles of here in the Yellow Hills. That last one scrawled in different writin' is Ben Naler."

"Huh," observed the Ranger. "Looks like Naler's name was added after the list was complete."

The handwriting was round and even, each letter formed with scrupulous care, except for Naler's which had been inscribed by someone not used to holding a pen or pencil.

They went on to the house as the Ranger pocketed the strange list. He was taking a graver and graver view of it as he turned it over in his mind. Styles was already dead. They had tried for Moss Jordan.

A girl standing in front of the porch hurried to Jordan and Naler.

"What was it?" she asked. "Burke again?"

"Yes, Connie," answered Jordan. "They've gone now. We're safe."

Moss Jordan led the way inside and struck a match. It had been Jordan who had been between the lamp and window and the bullet sent by Burke had missed by two feet, smashing the pane of glass and going high, thanks to Hatfield's action. Jordan lighted the table lamp and turned to the tall officer who bulked in the front door. Naler and the girl stood facing Hatfield.

"My daughter Connie," said Jordan. "Meet Mr. Hatfield, Connie."

The Ranger swept his Stetson off and bowed gallantly. Connie Jordan was exquisite. The plain blue calico dress she wore could not hide the loveliness of her figure, and such golden hair and liquid amber eyes as hers would cast a spell over any man. Hatfield was no exception and his glance was frankly admiring.

She smiled at him. "I'll fetch something to drink," she said, and went toward the back of the house.

Hatfield followed her with his eyes. Then he looked back and caught Ben Naler's gaze. He was startled at the scowl on the young cowman's pleasant face. But as he realized why, he felt amused. Naler was jealous.

But the Ranger had vital things on his mind. The death list burned in his pocket. Speed of action would mean life to the proscribed men on it. He could not rest till they were warned.

Connie came back carrying a tray with a pitcher of cider and a plate of sugared doughnuts on it. There was whisky in the bottle on the sideboard.

The Ranger sat down at the table with Jordan. Naler shook his head and took a chair in the corner. The young fellow looked sulky as Connie busied herself waiting on the visitor and her father.

Hatfield knew what was the matter with Naler and studiously avoided any further exchanges with the pretty girl. When Connie went out into the kitchen again, Ben Naler got up and followed her.

ROB and Hank were outside, burying the dead outlaw. One of them would stay on guard through the night.

"Yuh're right to keep a sentry out, Jordan," Hatfield said. "I'm thinkin' we oughtn't to waste any time in warnin' yore friends and neighbors on this list we snatched from Dowie Burke. In my opinion every man on it will be killed."

Moss Jordan jumped and his thick brows drew together.

"By Jupe yuh're right, Ranger! Come to think of it that list has to mean what yuh say. They aim to clean out the Yellow Hills!"

"Why?" asked Hatfield.

Moss Jordan shrugged. "Yuh got me there. I been wonderin' why they'd bother to kill a harmless old fossil like Lon and an old coot like me. Styles' place ain't worth fifty cents an acre. I got a few blooded hosses but they ain't tried to steal 'em."

Hatfield thought it over but as yet he could not guess the reason for Burke's attack on the inhabitants of the Yellow Hills.

The cool cider had a piquant tang and went down easily. He was dry from the powerful exertions against the drygulchers. He tried a doughnut and it was delicious, the crust crisp and the inside soft and tasty. Before the big officer knew it he had nearly emptied the platter.

"Yore daughter make 'em?" he asked.

"Yes, suh. She's a mighty good cook."

Naler trailed Connie back into the front room. Hatfield rose. He did not want to worry Naler, for he wanted the young cowman to be an ally and friend. Naler might have a sense of humor, but he was in deadly earnest over the girl.

"I'm in favor of gettin' those warnin's out tonight, Jordan," said the Ranger grimly. "When I was on my way here I saw Dowie Burke and his men crossin' the river a few miles back toward Stuart's Ford. S'pose they returned that way? Whose place would it bring 'em closest to?"

"Jack Phelps' farm," replied Jordan.

"Burke would be mighty riled at what happened. That sort of turkey is apt to lash out blind and take out his rage on whoever is near. He's lost his list but he'd likely remember some of the names on it. Phelps comes after yores."

Moss Jordan agreed. "I don't dare leave Connie here unguarded, though," he objected.

"Tell me how to reach Phelps' and I'll go there myself," said the Ranger. "Send Rob and Hank with notes to warn the others. You stick here with Naler and watch yore home."

CHAPTER VI

Men of the Yellow Hills

NALER, Hatfield knew, was not acquainted with the Yellow Hills, but neither was the Ranger. Hatfield was sure, though, that he could find the Phelps farm in the night if given explicit directions. Anyhow, he preferred to leave Naler with Jordan for there was always a chance that Burke might double back and again try to kill Moss.

Jordan gave him a brief note to John Phelps. Hatfield would pose for a time as simply a friend of Jordan's, until he could see what was what in the district.

The Ranger left Jordan busy writing further warnings to the people of the Yellow Hills. He whistled, and after a short time the golden sorrel came to him. Mounting, Hatfield started back on the road. When he had made a few miles he turned and crossed the stream.

He was alert and ready for anything,

but only the moon-bathed hills loomed before him as he climbed from the valley. Save for the sounds of nature the land seemed peaceful and deserted.

After about an hour's ride from the Colorado crossing he sighted the lights of a house, set back from the river.

"That will be it, Goldy," he murmured.

He dismounted out from the circle of light and scouted closer. He could see no horses and as he strained his ears to listen he caught the sound of a woman in the house sobbing, sobbing with heart-broken violence.

Hatfield knew then what must have happened. He knocked at the front door and the crying checked. There was a silence and then a frightened voice gasped:

"Who is it?"

"I'm a friend, ma'am," replied the Ranger gently. "Moss Jordan sent me to warn yuh. But I reckon I'm too late."

After a time the bolt was pulled back and the door opened. The tall officer looked down on a small woman with black hair drawn tightly back from her pallid face. Her eyes were red from weeping and when Hatfield glanced past her he saw a man lying on the couch.

It was difficult for her to speak.

"My husband," she whispered. "Dead!" She was evidently suffering from shock.

"Mama!" a child called. "Who's there?"

"It's all right, Johnny," she soothed, trying to keep the anguish and fright from her voice as she reassured the boy.

Fury burned the tall Ranger. Seeing the stricken family who had lost husband and father made him grind his teeth in baffled anger. Beaten off at Jordan's, the vicious Dowie Burke and his bunch had struck Phelps and killed. . . .

The next morning broke bright and warm over the Yellow Hills. Mrs. Phelps had refused to leave her husband's body during the night but she had promised that she would come with her children to Jordan's after the burial, which would take place that day.

Hatfield had ridden back to Jordan's. Rob and Hank, he found, had been out till dawn spreading the warning to the men involved. A few hours' sleep had restored Hatfield and given Goldy a chance to rest. By the time the Ranger was in the kitchen, eating a hearty breakfast of hot cakes and bacon, washed down by several cups of coffee and set before the men by Connie, Moss Jordan, meantime, had despatched Rob to Phelps' with a wagon to bring Mrs. Phelps and the children back. Rob would pitch in and help the widow and her sister straighten things up. By that time other neighbors would be on hand and Connie and Moss intended to ride over for the burial later in the day.

Ben Naler trailed Hatfield out into the stable yard. They rolled smokes and lighted up, Naler politely holding a match for the Ranger. Moss Jordan was working around the stables.

"That Dowie Burke is a mad dog and ought to be shot on sight," observed Naler.

Hatfield nodded. "I'd like to get hold of him, Naler."

Naler was a naturally friendly young fellow. But he was head over heels in love with Connie Jordan and as yet had not dared test his luck by asking her to marry him, and he also could see that the tall stranger impressed men and women with his power and manner. So the green-eyed monster had eaten at his soul.

But since the Ranger had noted how Naler felt, he had taken care not to show too much interest in the pretty girl. And of course Naler could have no idea who Hatfield was, since the Ranger had told only Moss Jordan of his real identity. Now both men were doing their best to keep a friendly spirit uppermost.

THE sun was coming up and the world was lovely. Nearby ran the river and the Yellow Hills rose about them. The valley road, which had been such a danger spot in the night, was empty and stretched along in a winding yellow ribbon. In the blue sky here and there could be seen stains of smoke where some farm or other settler's home stood.

"They got some nice hosses here," offered Naler.

The top halves of the doors in the stalls stood open and a dozen horses had their heads out. Naler led the Ranger down the line, introducing him to each horse. Here it was a matter of quality rather than quantity.

The animals were beautifully groomed and cared for and as spoiled as petted children. They were far different horses than the chunky wild mustangs of the Plains. Their legs were slender and they

were taller, with arched necks and the mettled nerves of pedigreed creatures. Three of the mares had colts with them.

"I shore love hosses," said Ben Naler, fondling the silky neck of a chestnut mare who nuzzled at him.

"Me too." Hatfield nodded. "A good one is the best friend a man could have."

"My idea is to buy some good stock and try to improve the breed on my ranch out there," continued Naler. "Jordan has the best I've seen. He's mighty careful and good at breedin' 'em. If he had a little money he could do a mighty fine job but he lost his last peso in the war."

Jordan, Naler explained, had brought a few animals from Kentucky. They were Arabian strain. But it was slow business, building up any backlog of stock to sell.

Naler and Hatfield pitched in to assist Jordan with the chores. Hank was sleeping somewhere in the barn as he had been up all night carrying warnings to the neighbors. After rubbing down and petting each horse the animals were turned into a grassy pasture fenced along the river. The colts kicked up their long legs and frolicked around their mothers as they made the circuit of the pen in their morning constitutional.

By the time the men had finished and had washed up, Connie had tidied the house and was dressing to go to the Phelps home. Moss Jordan saddled his own and his daughter's riding horses. Hatfield made Goldy ready and Naler had a rangy bay gelding to ride.

Jordan's shrewd horseman's eyes examined Goldy. He walked around the sorrel a couple of times and pushed back his hat, his eyes narrowing.

"He's a beaut," said Jordan. "Even if I was tryin' to buy him I couldn't find anything wrong."

The four reached the Phelps place after noon. The preacher had been sent for from town and neighbors had come in wagons or on horseback for the funeral. Mrs. Phelps had regained some of her composure, although she was pale and nervous. The children were young, ranging from three years old to nine—two boys and two girls.

The women had pitched in and taken over. The house had been set aright and all was ready.

Everybody knew Moss Jordan, and the colonel introduced Naler and Hatfield. The Ranger met Sam Olliphant, who owned a little ranch up the river from Jordan's. Olliphant, a big, breezy man of forty in clean range clothing, had a wife and children and hired five cowboys.

Van Lewis was another whose name was on the death list now in the Ranger's pocket. Lewis was a former Confederate soldier and owned a farm north of Phelps' in the Yellow Hills. He was short and slim, dark of features, a silent man with expressive black eyes.

Mark Ellsworth, still another of Dowie Burke's intended victims, had a cabin down the river just above Stuart's Ford. He had a small income, raised crops in season, and had a few cows and chickens to eke out a living for his growing family. He was under thirty and was clad in "Sunday" clothes for the funeral.

The names on the list resolved thus into living people with the hopes and fears of humanity, men on whom women and children depended for life itself. Hatfield gauged them and liked them. They had faults and foibles, but so did all men.

The Ranger shook hands with stout "Pop" Murphy, whose Irish brogue was amusing to hear and whose good nature never deserted him.

"Pop's the champion of the hills," Moss Jordan explained, grinning. "He's got more kids than anybody else. How many is it, Pop—fourteen or fifteen?"

"Ah I lose count of the rascals meself." Murphy grinned too.

MURPHY had had a warning from Jordan, for his name was on the death paper. Now he questioned Moss about it, seeking to understand what was going on.

"We ain't shore," replied Jordan. "But we figger that Dowie Burke and his gunslingers aim to clean us all out of the Yellow Hills. They got Phelps and they got Styles. They tried for me a couple times."

"Then we should band together and run this Burke devil into the Gulf," declared Murphy. "In union there is strength, say I."

"Yuh're right there, Murphy," agreed Hatfield. "It's a mighty good idea. S'pose we tip off yore friends concerned, Jordan, while they're all together today?"

That suited Moss Jordan.

All the men were curious about the grim warning sent them by Jordan, as was natural. Duke Ulman, a rancher, Charlie Sutton, a farmer, and four more men were on the list and Hatfield and Jordan talked with all of them while waiting for the services to begin. . . .

Later in the afternoon, when the remains of John Phelps had been given proper burial, Hatfield collected a dozen riders and, led by Jordan and Naler, they made the run to Lon Styles' shack in the hills, where Dowie Burke had been seen.

But the cabin was deserted. Burke and his men were not around. But there was sign of them, when Hatfield and Ben Naler checked up around the place.

"They were here not long ago, mebbe this mornin' early," said the Ranger. "Wish I could get one good look at that killer—over my sights."

As yet the tall officer had not had a good look at Burke, for he had not seen the man in the daylight. His contact with the leader of the killers had been confined to the events of the night when he had clashed with Dowie in the darkness.

The men of the Yellow Hills had been keyed up for a real fight with Dowie Burke and now they felt let down, with the birds flown. They had gone on a wild-goose chase, and were subdued as they returned to the Phelps ranchhouse.

The people there were making ready to return to their homes. Mrs. Phelps and her family would go to Jordan's although they had a dozen offers of hospitality. Rob had had a nap and would drive the wagon with the guests in it. Connie and Moss Jordan on their horses, and several neighbors going across the river and up the valley road would accompany them as far as Jordan's farm.

"Naler, you've seen Dowie Burke," said Hatfield. "From the trail they left they may have headed to Stuart's Ford. Mebbe we could spot Burke if we went there. Are yuh game?"

"Shore I'm game. Wait till I tell Connie and Colonel Jordan."

As the two young men set off toward the town the sun was behind them and growing red, preparing to drop behind the Yellow Hills.

CHAPTER VII

Stuart's Ford

LIGHT of day was gone when Hatfield and Ben Naler sighted the settlement, and it was growing darker as they rode down Main Street. Lamps had come on and the Palace—the hotel and largest saloon—was brightly lighted. The smell of supper cooking was in the warm air. Men and women were about, and horses and teams stood in the gutters.

Naler and Hatfield pulled up near the Palace.

"There's Dowie Burke now, goin' into the saloon!" Naler said suddenly. "See him? That big hound in the leather jacket and brown Stetson? Two of his men with him."

"Keep back," warned the Ranger. "Let 'em get inside."

In the shadows of the long wooden awn-

[Turn page]

Tired Kidneys Often Bring Sleepless Nights

Doctors say your kidneys contain 15 miles of tiny tubes or filters which help to purify the blood and keep you healthy. When they get tired and don't work right in the daytime, many people have to get up nights. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder. Don't neglect this condition and lose valuable, restful sleep.

When disorder of kidney function permits poisonous matter to remain in your blood, it may also cause nagging backache, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, a stimulant diuretic, used successfully by millions for over 50 years. Doan's give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from your blood. Get Doan's Pills. (Adv.)

ing over the sidewalk they quietly dismounted.

"I'll make the play, Naler," said Hatfield.

Naler looked around at him. "Burke's mighty tough."

Naler was curious about Hatfield, wondering how he had happened to come to the Yellow Hills. The Ranger understood that. He knew that Naler had an inquisitive, perhaps suspicious mind but a man needed one to survive in the country where Naler lived. A man could not trust every rider who came along.

It was not etiquette to ask questions as to a man's past, but a stranger needed to prove himself to the hilt with such a person as Naler. Motives were uppermost in Naler's brain. Hatfield already had done his best to stop Naler worrying about Connie, but now he knew that to ensure Naler's whole-hearted cooperation he must tell the young cowman just who and what he was.

He touched the tall young rancher's shoulder.

"I come here in answer to Jordan's call for help, Naler," he said in a low voice. "I'm a Texas Ranger, Jim Hatfield's my real handle. I like to work quietlike till I see what's what, savvy? So keep it to yoreself. If anybody asks yuh just say I'm yore pardner out on yore ranch."

The confidence pleased Naler and flattered him.

"A Ranger! I thought yuh were a mighty salty passerby! I'm with yuh all the way, Hatfield. Shake!"

His grip was firm and the invisible wall which Naler had kept between himself and Hatfield melted away. He had become a wholehearted ally instead of a questioning one.

The Palace had a second floor and up front was a balcony with lighted windows open on it.

"Somebody's in the A suite," remarked Naler, who had stayed at the Palace before stopping at Jordan's, and knew how the settlement hotel aped city caravansaries in numbering its rooms.

"I'll go in first and turn to the bar on the right," said Hatfield. "You follow me, Naler. Don't make any play unless Burke forces it or I open the ball."

"Right."

Hatfield ducked under the rail and stepped up on the wide porch. The batwings were open and he could look down the long bar. Sawdust was on the floor and there were tables and benches on his left, the bar on his right. It was lively, with plenty of thirsty customers at this time of day.

The two riders who had entered with Dowie Burke were halfway down the line and had shouldered to the counter. They were banging with their fists and calling for drinks. But the Ranger could not see Burke.

Naler sauntered in and turned to the bar without looking at the tall Ranger, who stood against the front wall. Naler was seen by Burke's men and they began to scowl as they assumed a ready attitude. Both wore two Colts, and they were bearded, dirty and tough in aspect. They dog-eyed the imperturbable Naler who feigned not to notice.

A closed door was at the back of the saloon. Over on the far side of the tables was an open archway leading into a long hall with a counter and desk. Behind this desk sat a middle-aged woman, the proprietor's wife. A wooden staircase led to the floor above and on the counter was a large ledger used as a hotel register. Hatfield had signed it when he had hired a bed for a sleep at the time of his arrival in Stuart's Ford.

Hatfield saw a small hole in the crowd up front and moved to the bar. Naler stood behind a cowboy, waiting his turn.

The Ranger was halfway through his slow drink before Dowie Burke came down the stairs and crossed the lobby, pausing in the archway to sweep the saloon with a swift gaze. Naler cleared his throat and coughed loudly. Burke frowned as he recognized Naler but did not make any threatening move. Instead Dowie turned and went to the rear of the saloon.

IN THE bright light Burke was a tough-looking proposition. Hatfield could understand why he had had such a tussle with the man. Burke must weigh over two hundred but he was not fat at all. He had a massive fighting jaw and hot black eyes. His curly black hair was long around his ears and down the nape of his bulldog neck.

There were bruises and fresh scratches

on his sullen face, no doubt marks of the wrestling match with the Ranger. When Burke raised a hand to signal the barkeeper it looked as though he were waving a cured ham. He had on a leather jacket and old chaps, Stetson, half-boots and blue pants. Crossed belts at his burly waist supported his well-kept guns.

"That hand of Burke's never wrote them fine letters on my list," mused Hatfield. "If he can scrawl he's lucky."

Had someone given Burke the death roster so that Dowie would know whom to kill in the Yellow Hills?

Hatfield could see through the wide archway into the lobby. Now another man came downstairs but he was entirely different from Burke in appearance. He was an elegant personage—that could be told at a glance. His portly figure was clad in a fine dark suit, with a white shirt and stock at his bearded throat. The light glinted on highly polished shoes of the softest leather. In the stock rode a big solitaire diamond darting rainbow colors as it caught the lamplight, and there were jewels in the rings on his well-kept white hands. He carried a thick cane and the cut of his coat permitted much of his fancy vest to be seen, with a massive gold chain and diamond fob suspended from pocket to pocket.

Hatfield took in the eagle look of the elegant one's face with the strong nose and dominant eyes.

"He must have had that A suite," decided the Ranger. "Nothin' else would do! I wonder if he's the man Dowie Burke went upstairs to pow-wow with?"

The bearded swell swept the bar with his glance and though he stared straight at Dowie Burke no sign of recognition passed between them. Drawn by the puzzle of it all, the Ranger moved over closer, feigning to be hunting a seat at a table near the connecting passage.

The bearded man had reached the desk. His face seamed with a smile as he lifted his black hat to the woman there in a courtly gesture. In a strong, commanding voice he said:

"The fare was most excellent, Mrs. Rolls. I have seldom tasted better and I have eaten in many places and countries. *Experto credite*, as they say— Believe one who knows by experience!"

"Thank you, sir," she said with a smile. "Come again."

The gentleman paid his bill from a large roll and carelessly shoved the remainder back in a pocket. A slim, dark-faced Spanish-looking man in a plain black suit and derby hat came down, carrying two heavy bags. The swell at the desk raised his hat in farewell to the proprietress and went outside, the man with the valises following.

Hatfield could see the hotel's exit, another door from that of the bar. The stout man was helped into a shining buggy drawn by two fast grays. The thin servant treated his master with the most obsequious attention, arranging a carriage robe over his knees and holding a match to the cigar clenched between the bearded lips.

Hatfield slipped outside. The windows of the A suite were dark, the lamps having been blown out by those leaving. The Spanish servitor was stowing the valises in the back compartment of the buggy. He closed the top and climbed to the driver's seat, taking the reins and clucking to the grays. They moved off in a rush. The wheels were greased and the patent-leather body creaked as the carriage drew away and disappeared on the east road from Stuart's Ford.

The Ranger rubbed his chin thoughtfully. He was definitely interested. He went through the door on the hotel side and touched his Stetson to the woman who gave him an earnest look and then a smile.

"That's quite a gent who just left, ma'am," he observed off-handedly.

"That's Mr. Tynsdale," she informed him.

"He been here before?"

"Oh yes. This is his fourth visit."

The register lay open. Stuart's Ford had few visitors from the outside world. Hatfield read the names. His own signature was there and so was Naler's. The last guest to sign had been the elegant swell who had just left in the buggy. The Ranger stared at the line:

Sidney Tynsdale, Esq., Houston Tex.

Coldness prickled up and down the tall officer's spine. The handwriting was round and even, each letter scrupulously formed, showing the determined character of the

author and his intense application to details. Hatfield was certain that he had seen a specimen of that writing before—on the death roster in his pocket!

THE discovery opened a mystifying and alarming vista to the Ranger. Burke had loomed large, but from the facts Hatfield could now deduce Dowie was only an agent, a tool of a much cleverer, more dangerous man.

The latest Tynsdale signature was on the right hand side of the ledger. Hatfield's quick eye traveled up the lines and on the other page he found Tynsdale again. The date was a day before that of Lon Styles' killing.

"Mind if I turn back a few pages, ma'am?" he begged softly, looking the woman in the eye. "I was hopin' to find an old pard in these parts."

"Go ahead, sir," she replied. "Help yourself." He had a deep respect and courtesy for women and none could look upon the tall Ranger without realizing that.

Tynsdale, he found, had been in Stuart's Ford on four occasions, as the woman had said. At least he had registered at the hotel that many times. The first visit to the vicinity recorded in the hotel register had been about a month previously.

"Must be a mighty urgent reason to draw such an hombre to a neck in the woods like this!" Hatfield thought.

He turned over his information in his alert mind.

"I'll bet Tynsdale wrote that list and gave it to Dowie Burke," he decided. "Then Dowie added Ben Naler's name. If it ain't so I'll eat my hat, strap, runner and all."

None of his excitement, however, showed in his rugged, bronzed face which the proprietress regarded with admiration. Her voice startled him from his reverie.

"Do you ever write to your mother?" she inquired. "You ought to, you know. She would worry about you. Here's an envelope and paper and pen. I'll mail it for you."

"You're mighty sweet, ma'am," he murmured. "But my mother's dead."

Sympathy touched her eyes. She sighed. Added to the big young man's other attractions was the fact he was an orphan.

"Who was the Spanish lookin' hombre with Tynsdale?" he asked.

"That's Felipe Palacio, Mr. Tynsdale's secretary and aide."

Suddenly Hatfield whirled on the balls of his feet, for a difference in the sounds from the noisy saloon warned him of danger. It was an abrupt menace and Hatfield realized what it was as he looked through the archway and saw a tough confronting Ben Naler.

His trained eye told the Ranger instantly they were after Naler and meant to kill! Hatfield's glance flicked to Dowie Burke to see just where the burly chief stood. Dowie was still down the bar and close to his two men. Burke and everybody else for that matter were staring at Naler and the plug-ugly challenging the rancher!

CHAPTER VIII

A Narrow Squeak

ALTHOUGH there had seemed to be no room at the bar a few moments ago there was plenty of space cleared now, as men sought to get out of the line of fire. Experts at judging the paths flying lead might take, spectators silently set themselves. Naler had turned with his back to the mirror and rail. He had one high heel hooked in the footrest and his elbows on the edge of the bar. A wide-bodied man in a black shirt and scratched riding leather, and with a dark Stetson curved over his low brow, was cursing Naler. Hatfield could see the deep red of the bull neck and glimpse a dirty cheek with beard stubble on it.

"Yuh stepped on my foot, cuss yuh!" snarled the tough. "Ain't there enough room in the world without a two-bit no-good hound like you havin' to walk all over yore betters?" He ended with virulent abuse and paused for breath.

Naler's clear drawl reached everybody in the saloon.

"Run along, sonny, or I'll wash out yore mouth with soap for usin' such language."

Ridicule was one thing that such a gunslinger's ego could not brook and the titter from the listeners goaded Burke's man

to blind fury. With a hoarse shout he threw a punch at Naler but the rancher weaved his head aside. Raising a spurred foot and heaving up on the rail, braced against the bar, Naler drove a kick into the tough's middle and sent him sprawling in the sawdust.

Hatfield had reached the archway now —just in time to see the gunslinger come to his knees and whip out a Colt, the weapon rising and cocking under his blunt thumb as he pointed at Naler for the kill.

Three pistols seemed to explode simultaneously. Naler and Hatfield had both drawn and fired and the tough's gun went off, too. Hatfield saw Naler jump. The rancher stood before the bar and stared as Dowie Burke's killer dropped his arm and fell on his face, wriggling in the wet sawdust.

But the Ranger dared not waste an instant of time, for he knew Dowie Burke was the dangerous one. Burke was after Naler and had sent the gunhand to draw out the rancher.

Hatfield whirled around. The woman at the desk had screamed once and then ducked behind the counter.

"Outside—run for it, Naler!" shouted the Ranger even as he hurried a shot off to take care of Burke.

Down the bar Dowie Burke had made a draw and even now was about to kill Naler. His two companions had their Colts out and rising, to blast the cowman. Hatfield tried for Burke with a snap shot, as the crowd surged back. He did not wish to injure any innocent bystanders, but as he raised his thumb off his pistol hammer one of Dowie's followers darted between the Ranger's position and Burke and caught the heavy slug in the shoulder.

Guns were snapping but Burke's aim was wrecked as his own man blundered against him, howling with pain and clutching his right arm. The other gunslinger was blocked and shoved aside by the retreating customers.

Ben Naler had jumped for the door as Hatfield sharply warned him. Burke was behind some others and aware of the Ranger's fire. He sent a quickie which knocked a long splinter from the side of the archway. Hatfield drew back, but Naler was given another few moments to make the exit as Hatfield attracted Burke's lead.

Nobody wanted to be near the participants and Burke had to shift as he found himself in the open with his tall opponent partly sheltered by the wall. With a sharp cry Burke slid over the bar and dropped behind it. The barkeepers had already ducked. Both of Dowie's men dashed for the back door.

Hatfield sent a couple across the bar at the point where Dowie Burke had disappeared. It delayed Dowie's bobbing up to shoot again and when the burly killer showed a few feet from the spot where he had disappeared behind the bar, Ben Naler was outside.

Burke began hooting and whistling as Hatfield's tearing lead forced his head down. There was a brief lull in the fire and gray gunsmoke drifted to the heated areas around the hanging gilt oil lamps.

Crouched at the edge of the archway Hatfield heard answering howls to Burke's calls. More of Dowie's followers must be close at hand and were coming.

The Ranger turned and pelted out through the hotel exit. He bumped violently into Ben Naler who was coming back inside to help him in the fight.

"Watch it!" gasped Naler. "Six or eight of Burke's boys are runnin' up the street."

A STENTORIAN challenge came from the plaza. A lone man came galloping toward the Palace.

"Halt there! Cut it out!"

"That's the marshal," said Naler hurriedly.

The lone constable was brave enough as he charged toward the center of the disturbance. Dowie Burke had thrown open a side window and was calling his men by name as he urged them into the fray. Burke was hard, and as far as physical prowess went he was a dangerous opponent.

Naler was limping.

"Is it bad?" asked Hatfield.

"No, just a burn. That first one cut my boot wide open."

"We better sashay. No sense in makin' a fight here. They outnumber us and they'll shoot us in the back if they get the chance. Come on!"

Hatfield and Naler trotted across the wooden walk to duck under the hitch-

rail. Goldy and Naler's horse were up the way and the two men hit leather and turned along Main. Dowie Burke plummeted from the dark slit between the Palace and the next building. He had come out the side window and was calling up his crowd in a brassy voice.

"There they go! They downed Nifty! Kill 'em! It's Naler and a pard of his!"

The main gang had come up now and they all began sending shots after the Ranger and Naler. But they had only a few brief glimpses of the fleeing pair as they crossed the creek, drawing out of easy Colt range.

Dowie Burke's fighting dander was up, though, and he did not mean to give up so easily. He called to his followers who picked up their mustangs and set out after the two who had come out ahead in the brief encounter at the Palace. Blood lust burned in Burke's hard soul.

The moon was up. The creek road quickly petered out into the main dirt road running along the south bank of the river. Hatfield and Naler passed another wooden bridge and stayed on that side, the rising hills showing black against the silver sky. Dust swirled from the beating hoofs.

Hatfield glanced back over a hunched shoulder.

"Here they come!" he remarked.

They had a few hundred yards start. Dowie Burke and perhaps ten more riders were bunched together and were silhouetted against the lighted settlement as they flogged and spurred their horses.

Since his discovery of Sidney Tynsdale, the Ranger had lost much of his interest in Dowie Burke. Contempt entered into his account of Burke, contempt for a slow-witted killer who showed his hand and was marked for the law and for vengeance. Burke was an outlaw and no doubt a proficient gunfighter in a knock-down-dragout fight. But he had no finesse.

Sidney Tynsdale loomed large in the Ranger's imagination. Because of Burke's stupidity Hatfield had been set on Tynsdale's trail. He would never leave it now until either he or Tynsdale was done for.

"They're pickin' up!" called Naler. "We better hustle."

"Lead 'em on and tire out their hosses for a while," said Hatfield. He swung in the saddle to fire a long one back at the pursuers. They replied with howls and a burst of Colts, but the range was too far and the jolting pace ruined any attempt at accurate aim.

After a half-hour of teasing the ravening enemy, Hatfield said:

"Come on, let's hit the ford just above here, Naler!"

"All right. But it takes us away from Jordan's. Ain't we headin' there?"

"Not me. Not yet, anyway. I got an idea."

"They're usually good ones," said Naler, the words jolted from him by the motion of the big horse under him. "Let's have it."

"We'll keep Burke on our trail as long as we can. It will tire their hosses. They'll hunt a place to rest and if we're near Styles' shack they may go there for a while. Savvy?"

Naler rode on for fifty yards, then said:

"I guess I do. While they're holed up at Styles', one of us can fetch Jordan and enough fightin' men to wipe out Burke and his bunch."

"Yuh get a gold star for that," the Ranger applauded.

He cut down across a meadow and with Naler near him crossed the Colorado. They rode up the opposite slant for a hundred yards and Hatfield sent a couple of betraying shots at Burke.

The still furious gunslinger yelped and shot replies. They came swarming across the river and up the slope on Hatfield's trail. The riding grew rough as there was no road along the route the Ranger picked. But he must tire out the mustangs. Goldy and Naler's rangy bay were better horses and could last longer.

FOR two hours the Ranger managed to draw Burke and his killers on into the Yellow Hills.

But at last the pursuers gave up. Hatfield and Naler stopped and turned to shoot at Burke and his bunch but they could not make them come any farther.

"They're through," said Hatfield. "Come on, let's go over the hill."

Naler and the Ranger moved slowly to a wooded slope. In the trees Hatfield turned and watched. They could see the dark figures of their enemies in the hollow. Cigarettes glowed red as the gun-

slingers lighted up and let their horses blow.

After a time Burke led his men north.

"They're headin' for the trail up there," said Naler.

"I reckon that leads to Styles' eventually," said Hatfield.

"That's right."

At a safe distance they shadowed Burke and his riders. From a height overlooking the north bank road they saw and heard the bunch go by, headed in the direction of Lon Styles' cabin. Carefully, trailing by the risen dust and by ear, Hatfield and Naler ended up near the little shack where Styles had lived and died. Creeping close, they could see the mustangs in the open space. On the outside hearth the killers were lighting a fire. They were hungry after the long run.

Hatfield and Naler drew off and the Ranger gave his orders in a low voice.

"You go warn Moss Jordan. Fetch as many fighters as yuh can. I'll meet yuh here. Make it as near dawn as possible—that's a good time to attack. We'll sweep up Burke and his men and try to make 'em talk. There's somethin' I want to smell out, beyond Burke."

"What's that?"

"I can't go into it right now. There ain't time. Get goin'."

Naler touched the Ranger's hand and led his horse down the rocky hillside to a point where he could mount and ride.

Hatfield rubbed the lather off the sorrel and eased the cinches. When he had rested a bit he left Goldy in the patch of woods and moved closer to the cabin. A small fire glowed in the hearth and he could scent coffee and frying beef as the outlaws fixed themselves a satisfying meal before turning in. Their figures showed against the red glow and he could pick out Dowie Burke and several others he had seen in Stuart's Ford.

There was open space around the cabin but the two hills it nestled between cast black shadows and there were many uneven hummocks and protruding rocks to offer cover. Burke evidently believed that he and his men were safe at the spot for the moment. They had been chasing Naler and the unknown man who had interfered to save the rancher, and it was not in Burke's mind that the rabbit would turn and pursue the hounds.

Hatfield moved around to the shadowed side and downwind. He could catch their gruff voices as they had begun to eat and drink from bottles they had with them. The Ranger took off his boots and gunbelt and smeared dirt on his face and hands to kill any sheen of flesh. He left his Stetson behind and began crawling carefully closer to his foes.

Adept at the art, he reached a point where he could overhear what they were talking about.

CHAPTER IX

The Black Forest

THE men were lighting cigarettes after their meal while some busily spiked tin cups of steaming coffee from whisky flasks and squatted to drink. A couple of them were close to Dowie Burke's burly figure. Peering past the bulge of the cabin, Hatfield could see the vicious, big-jawed face of the leader as Burke's eyes glowed from the firelight.

"I tell yuh I don't like it, Dowie," a bearded outlaw was objecting.

"What's wrong?" growled Burke. "Yuh yellow?"

"No, and yuh savvy I ain't. This country is as safe right now as a hornet nest. They've spotted us and they'll come after us. What are we in this for—love or money? Yuh can't spend yore cash when yuh're buzzard bait."

There was a muttering of agreement. Burke's reply was rather mild. He was willing to discuss the matter with his followers.

"We got Styles and Phelps, ain't we? That's a good start. We near took Naler tonight but that's only for fun. I hate his hide. What right had he to horn in on this party?"

"And who was that big galoot who wrecked our fun at the Palace?" demanded the other outlaw. "I never seen him before. And I hope I never do again, if yuh want the truth. He's too salty."

"Some pard of Naler's, that's all," replied Dowie but there was no conviction in his voice.

He, too, had been impressed at the

Palace. He rubbed his ear speculatively for he had heard the close shriek of Hatfield's lead more than once during the evening.

"They're all up on their hind legs, Dowie," an owlhoot insisted. "Long as we could work on the quiet and in the dark it was fine with me. But look what happened at Jordan's last time. They near got yuh and yuh know it. We lost another man there. We're bein' whittled down."

Such men fought for money. They liked to hold a real advantage, too. Ardor cooled in them when they were faced with stern opposition. Burke stood alone against quitting the Yellow Hills and his argument was weak, as though he knew his men were right.

"I ain't goin' to stick at this place, not long, Dowie," warned his lieutenant. "They've been here after us and they'll come again. S'pose they set a trap here tonight? We'd have walked right in."

"If we stick I want more pay," declared another outlaw.

"All right," agreed Dowie, throwing up his hands. "We'll move out and lie low for a while till things quiet down."

The bearded gunslinger rose. "I'm sleepin' in the monte tonight. They ain't goin' to creep up on yores truly."

Hatfield was irritated, for the outlaws were making ready to shift. Their horses had had a short rest and they had eaten. He snaked slowly back, taking advantage of the stir they raised as they stamped out the fire and packed their belongings.

Later he followed them at a distance as they rode deep into the Yellow Hills. They went into a big woods and he could not follow on Goldy for he had no way of telling how far they had gone. He left the sorrel and crept to the forest, listening. All was silent save for the night insects and the faroff baying of a hound pack.

This terrain was entirely unfamiliar to him. He moved carefully into the woods and nearly ran over two men who had just settled down in their blankets in a tiny clearing. He froze to the ground.

"I had a plenty," he heard one say. "I'm pullin' out."

Hatfield drew back bit by bit. He concluded that Burke's bunch had split up and had hidden themselves through the dense woods to sleep. He could do nothing more, and weariness clutched at him. He slid back to the sorrel and saw to his horse for the night. Then he hid himself and snatched a sleep. . . .

The gray of dawn woke him. He saddled up and went to the spot where he had agreed to meet Ben Naler and the men of the Yellow Hills. The sun was just reddening the sky when he saw Naler coming up the wooded, rocky slope with Moss Jordan. They had brought along a dozen fighters, among them Olliphant, Duke Ulman, Charlie Sutton and Murphy, all on Burke's death list.

"They've moved," the Ranger informed them as they gathered about him. "They're three miles on, over the mountain. There's a big patch of pine woods where they holed up for the night."

"That must be what we call the Black Forest," said Moss Jordan. "It's a mighty big patch. We hunt through there in the fall."

"Come on, and we'll try to round 'em up," ordered the Ranger.

BURKE'S bearded aide had been right when he had said the Yellow Hills people were aroused. They were keyed up and in a shooting mood over the killings of Styles and Phelps and at the threat to their own lives. Hatfield glanced back as he rode up the mountain, glanced back at their grim faces and the steady way they gripped their guns. He would not need to urge those men to fight.

"I'd like to grab off a prisoner or two, boys," he said to Jordan and Naler. "There's somebody beyond Dowie Burke in this business."

It was broad daylight now and they could not hide their approach to the dense woods. Hatfield was out front. When he was a couple of hundred yards from the line of trees a warning shout went up and a gun banged. The bullet whirled over his head and he picked up speed as he charged.

There were aisles in the woods through which a horse could make a way. Jordan and his men were whooping it up as they followed the tall man on the sorrel. A few shots snarled at them from ahead. Through a long vista the Ranger had a quick glimpse of the startled Dowie Burke, looking back over his shoulder.

Burke was mounted and with three of his men. Hatfield tried for him but Burke slid down a bank behind tall pine boles and out of sight.

Heavy firing hunted in the brush and leaves for the enemy. They could, when they paused to listen, hear Burke's bunch crashing through before them in full retreat. Occasionally an enemy slug whistled in the air or plugged into a tree.

"They're splittin' up," announced Hatfield, as he heard several separated parties up front.

All morning they pushed through the wilderness. The woods petered out finally in the northeast. Jordan and the other ranchers had come over fast and their horses had not been fresh when they had begun the chase, while Burke had had a night's rest.

They gave up after noon. They had lost sight entirely of Dowie Burke himself who had managed to elude them before the forest petered out. Far ahead they could see two outlaws slowly climbing a long slope as they beat a retreat.

The pursuers called it a day and gathered to rest themselves and their horses. Smokes were rolled and bottles brought forth. Most of them were jubilant, feeling triumphant.

"We shore chased them sidewinders out of the country!" chortled Murphy.

"They won't come back and if they do we'll be ready for 'em!" boasted Mark Ellsworth.

Moss Jordan seemed satisfied, too. "I believe we threw a real jolt into Burke," he declared.

Ben Naler was noncommittal. He watched his tall friend, Hatfield, on whose opinion he had come to count.

The Ranger shook his head. "Mebbe they won't come back and mebbe they will, boys," drawled Hatfield. "Yuh mustn't relax. Keep watch night and day. It means yore lives."

Moss Jordan's eyes narrowed. "What do yuh know?" he inquired at last.

"I'm not shore of anything yet," answered the Ranger. "But I believe there's more to this than Dowie Burke and his crowd. Has any man here ever heard tell of a dude by the handle of Sidney Tynsdale? I believe he's from Houston."

Blank looks were exchanged between the men of the Yellow Hills and heads slowly shook.

"Wait a jiffy!" spoke up Sam Olliphant. "One time I was huntin' a few of my cows in the hills. I run onto an hombre in black leather and he had a Spanish lookin' feller with him. I spoke to 'em, asked if they'd seen my cattle. They said no. I told my name and asked theirs and this swell with the beard says his was Tindale or somethin' like it. I didn't get it clear. The Spanish one stared at me without sayin' a word till it gave me the creeps. I was glad to be shut of 'em."

"How long ago was this?" asked Hatfield.

Olliphant considered. "I'd say a month or five weeks back."

Hatfield thought, "That must have been Tynsdale and Palacio scoutin' the hills. But why?" Aloud he said, "I aim to leave for a while and try to clear all this up so yuh'll be safe for shore. If Burke don't come back I figger more and worse killers may strike. So stick together and be on guard."

Moss Jordan asked all his neighbors to his horse farm for dinner that night. Hatfield wished to give Goldy a full rest and he needed the same tonic himself, so he returned to Jordan's. Ranchers supplied sides of beef and a whole pig was brought over. Home-made breads, cookies, pies, and preserves were contributed. Everybody brought something to eat and drink.

IN DEFERENCE to the widow of John Phelps there was no music and no undue celebrating. That evening the people gathered together and talked of their own problems and of the great world outside the little area they knew. They were homely folk for the most part and small landholders.

Most of them had been Confederate sympathizers and the older men had fought in the Southern armies. But the War had been over for some years and the children were growing up. They preferred peace and the regime of the carpetbaggers had been hard on all.

Hatfield ate a tremendous hot meal. He watched the young men and especially Ben Naler, in whose suit he had grown interested for he had quickly come to like the rancher from the Pecos.

It was plain that Naler was not used to such gatherings, and he was modest and

shy around women. He felt out of place and showed it. He made one or two attempts to draw closer to Connie Jordan. She had been extremely busy helping feed the large company but when she was able to relax she was surrounded by a knot of men, among them several young bachelors who paid their court to her.

Sleep tugged at Hatfield's eyelids after the heavy meal. He kept stifling yawns and finally he slipped out the back door and went to the haybarn where he turned in....

At daybreak he was in the side corral saddling the golden sorrel. The damp mist from the river meadows rolled across the valley. He could hear Jordan's Kentucky thoroughbreds stamping in their stalls.

Naler came out and leaned on the rail watching him saddle up.

"Take me with yuh, Ranger?" asked Ben.

Hatfield thought it over. "Yuh really want to come?" he asked. "I might be able to use yuh. I've got to locate this Tynsdale in Houston and mebbe that's where Dowie Burke has run to."

Naler was eager to ride with him.

A number of guests had stayed for the night and some were stirring. Women were in the kitchen, building up the wood fire in the big iron stove.

Soon the appetizing odors of coffee and frying ham and eggs reached Hatfield and Naler.

Naler had saddled his rested bay gelding, a fine animal he had ridden over from his far-off home. They went inside and were fed by the women. Connie was in the kitchen.

"We're leavin' right after breakfast, ma'am," the Ranger told her. He watched the girl.

"You're going away, Ben?" she asked quietly.

"Yes'm."

She stopped smiling, then she nodded. 'Good-by, Ben. Good-by, Jim."

Ben Naler looked crestfallen. He bit his lip and went out. There were half a dozen women bustling about the kitchen and they made him feel ill at ease.

Moss Jordan was up and noisily greeting the new day. "Rise and shine!" cried Jordan.

Blanketed figures in the rooms and on the porch began to stir.

CHAPTER X

Contact

JIM HATFIELD and Ben Naler mounted and started for the road which led to Stuart's Ford and thence on to Houston. Naler rode with his chin on his chest. He was silent and his young face was grim.

Hatfield looked back at the house.

"She's standin' out in the yard to wave so-long, Naler," he murmured.

Ben Naler jumped in his saddle and glanced quickly around. When Connie saw that Naler was looking she wayed, and the two men waved back. The morning breeze stirred her golden hair and the blue dress she wore under her white apron.

Around the bend they could no longer see her and Naler settled down again to his gloomy mood.

"She's mighty pretty," said the Ranger, without looking at Naler. "Plenty of young fellers would give their eyeteeth for a girl like her."

"I know that," said Naler, and there was agony in his voice.

"It's all right to be some jealous. Yuh can't help that and it's natural. But a woman sizes up a man in her own way just as a man does a girl, Ben. If she's ordinarily polite she'll smile and talk with friendly folks. On the other hand she makes up her mind secret-like and it often don't take her long to do it."

Naler rode on in his black mood, his face stony.

"Have yuh spoken to her yet?" inquired the Ranger softly.

Naler had a fierce pride and he scowled, but then he shrugged and did not take offense.

"No," he admitted, abashed. "I am afeared to, Jim. S'pose she says no?"

"I don't believe she will."

Naler perked up, but quickly grew depressed again.

"Yuh don't savvy. She takes care of Colonel Jordan and she can't leave him. I couldn't ask her to. She likes ranchin' and if Jordan would move near me that might be all right. I'd give him all the

land he'd need. Still Jordan won't leave here, and I can't stick around forever. I got to get back to my ranch before rustlers steal all my stock. And there's a dozen young fellers in these parts who are courtin' Connie."

They picked up the pace, maintaining a brisk trot after the horses were warmed up. The sun was up ahead of them and the river flowed to their left as they moved along the valley road.

"Tell yuh what, Ben," said the Ranger finally. "I ain't got wings and a bow and arrer, but I'll play Cupid for yuh. I'll go and tell Jordan how things stand if yuh'll ask Connie when we get back from Houston."

"Yuh will?"

"Shore as it's hot where Burke and Tynsdale are goin'."

Naler drew in a deep breath of the warming air.

"I'm game. I'll do it!"

He seemed to feel more cheerful after this decision had been reached and the two young men began to chat and enjoy themselves as they moved along. . . .

Hatfield and Naler crossed the Colorado at Stuart's Ford. There was no sign of Burke and his men in the settlement. The Ranger and his saddle companion headed straight for Houston, leaving the valley of the Colorado behind them. In the afternoon they crossed the Brazos and rode through the flat Gulf plains.

They struck a dirt road and followed it past wide fields of cotton where Negro hands picked the crops and carried the laden baskets on their heads, singing as they labored. The wet wind from the mighty Gulf touched them, and the heat was like a steam bath.

It was still daylight when they sighted Houston ahead.

"It's an up and comin' town, Houston," remarked Hatfield. "Growin' like wildfire, Naler. San Jacinto battlefield is east-southeast of the city where old Sam Houston beat the head off Santa Ana."

"How far is Galveston?" asked Naler.

"Mebbe fifty miles southeast. That's Buffalo Bayou that Houston stands on. The town's a railroad and shippin' center, and more and more factories are comin' here."

Black smoke stained the sky from numerous brick chimney stacks. Naler sniffed at the tainted air. "I wouldn't like it," he said at once. "Hate cities."

"Me, too," Hatfield said, and added musingly, "Cotton, sugar, rice, lumber—why, Houston handles it all! Yuh need to watch her dust. I'll bet she outstrips every city in Texas for her size, and she's only been goin' forty years or so. Sam Houston himself helped lay the city out. I seen his house last time I was here, in Caroline Street. She was the capital of the Republic, yuh savvy, in the early days, before they moved to Austin."

IT WAS Naler's first visit to the metropolis which was growing with mushroom speed. The sea touched the cotton fields and the nearby range. Commerce and all sorts of trade flourished in Houston and to it flocked variegated characters all bent on the same purpose, the making of money.

Here swarmed capitalists and workers, sailors resting after long voyages, ranchers and cowboys who had driven herds to market. There were storekeepers and other tradesmen serving the inhabitants, the half world of gamblers and painted women. Below them were the dregs of humanity, thieves and worse rascals, preying on decent people.

"How do yuh aim to go about findin' this Tynsdale hombre?" inquired Naler, confused at the increasing bustle about them as they headed for the center of the city.

"I'm hopin' he may be so important folks will know him. I'll smell him out somehow."

A big dray laden with bales of cotton and drawn by four heavy horses thundered by them, driven by a cursing demon plying his whip and shrieking imprecations on anyone in the way. Naler's mettled horse reared and fought the bit and Naler had a session with his mount.

Evening was at hand. The low sun sent its spreading rays in golden splendor across Buffalo Bayou. On the shore stood many fine mansions, out of the way of the main bustle of the town.

Wagons and saddle horses blocked the cobbled streets. Drays and trucks passed both ways, pushing the riders to the gutter. Workmen and a mixed crowd of passersby were on the sidewalks, and the street lamps and lights in the saloons, res-

taurants and homes were coming on. Houston hummed with humanity and with action.

"There's a livery stable I went to before down this side street," said the Ranger, leading the way.

Pete's Stable stood on a quieter byway. It had a fenced yard with shade in the rear and plenty of stalls. Naler and Hatfield saw to their own horses, rubbing them down, and leaving strict orders as to watering and feeding.

Then the two tall young fellows walked toward the center of the city. Heedless and hurrying pedestrians bumped into them and they had to dodge drays and hansom cabs as they crossed the streets. They paused under a street light at a corner and a couple of young women smiled and nodded to them.

"There's a big saloon up here called Tony's," said the Ranger. "They got the best free lunch in Texas. Come on." He was rather enjoying showing his friend Naler the sights.

Tony's Metropolis was a huge place and filled with drinkers. The long bar ran all the way through to the other block on one side and on the other stood tables heaped with delicacies for the customers to enjoy. Great roasts of beef, hams, corned beef, pork chops, pig's feet, tripe, sausages and oysters. There was liver, kidneys, clams and shrimp, hard-boiled eggs, potatoes and other vegetables. Also to be had was tongue, fried chicken, rolls and corn bread. Preserves, candies, and many other sweets, filled the boards.

Naler stared, astounded.

"Never see so much chow in all my born days! Where do yuh start?"

"Over here," said the Ranger drily, indicating the mahogany bar. "Yuh have to buy a drink first."

He nodded toward the burly bouncers who were unobtrusively watching for tramps and other raiders who might try to take food without the formality of purchasing at least a small beer.

THEY took their drinks to the free lunch counters and ate until they could not hold any more.

There was a dance floor through a wide opening. Hurdy-gurdy music banged from there and the building shook as couples bounced around to the lilting tunes. A female singer's brassy wail reached them:

I'm only a bir-rd in a gil-ded cahage . . .

The saloon hummed with men relaxing after the day's work. Tobacco smoke hung dense in the rafters. Upstairs were gambling rooms.

"Let's get outside," gasped Naler. "I need a breath of air."

"Wait for me on the porch. Be with yuh in a jiffy."

Hatfield went to the bar and signaled a bartender.

"What'll it be?" asked the aproned attendant.

"Yuh ever hear tell of an hombre by the name of Tynsdale?"

"Tynsdale? What's his first name?" The barkeeper turned away with a quick nod to serve another customer nearby.

When he came back, Hatfield replied, "Sidney."

"Sidney who?"

"Now wait a minute," ordered the Ranger. "I asked if yuh'd savvy Tynsdale, *amigo*."

"Oh, yeah, yeah. Huh. Tynsdale. I've heard the handle. Why don't yuh look in the city directory? The boss has one in the front office."

The directory was a help. It listed Tynsdale. Hatfield quickly memorized the information and rejoined Naler.

"What luck?" asked the rancher.

"Interestin'. Tynsdale is a manufacturer and has a factory on Front Street. He lives out on the Bayou shore. But we'll find a room and get some shut-eye. Start on Tynsdale in the mornin'."

They spent the night in a rooming house and were up and had breakfasted at an early hour. Picking up their horses they rode the miles to Tynsdale's factory, a long building made of red bricks sooted by the smoke from the big stacks. It was set off by itself in a large lot down the waterfront. The firm had a private railroad siding on which stood several cars. In a smaller, separate structure were the offices.

A large sign proclaimed the nature of the Tynsdale enterprises:

SIDNEY TYNSDALE & CO.
Mfr. of Gunpowders, Fireworks,
Matches, Sulphuric Acid.
Wholesale Only.

Workers were arriving and pouring in at the factory gates. Naler and Hatfield stayed back out of the way, across the street.

"There he is!" said the Ranger.

An equipage drove up and stopped before the office. The dark man of whom Naler had spoken to Hatfield, and, who was Felipe Palacio, jumped down and obsequiously assisted Sidney Tynsdale to the walk. Tynsdale wore a derby hat and a blue business suit. A diamond glinted in his necktie. He was carrying a stick with a jeweled head, and wore kid gloves.

"He shore dresses fit to kill," remarked Naler.

Palacio trailed his master inside. The lean, Spanish-looking man was wearing the same plain black suit and hat in which the Ranger had seen him before.

Hatfield watched the office door shut behind Palacio. He pushed back his Stetson and scratched his head. He could not as yet see what Tynsdale's game could be, attacking the people of the Yellow Hills. Here in the broad daylight of the bustling city, it was hard to believe that the elegant proprietor of the powder plant had any connection with Dowie Burke and the roster of death which Hatfield had come upon.

"Here goes," said the Ranger. "I'm goin' inside, Naler. You wait out here and don't show unless yuh hear me call."

CHAPTER XI

Lion's Den

GOING across the street at a swift pace, the Ranger entered the Tynsdale & Co. office. He found himself in a short corridor with an umbrella stand and coat rack hemming him in. Ahead was an open door into a square anteroom and a young man sat at a desk watching him as he entered. There were benches around the room and pictures on the cream-colored walls.

Behind the young fellow on guard were two oak portals. On the one on the left a brass plate announced, "Mr. Tynsdale. Private." The other was marked "Offices."

"Good morning, sir." The clerk smiled as the tall man paused before him. "Are you Mr. Spoffendorf? You're early. Mr. Tynsdale just arrived."

"Yes, and it's him I want to see," replied the Ranger softly, thus evading the question.

He could hear voices behind the oaken doors. One seemed to come from Tynsdale's private office. It sounded like the dominating tones of the elegant bearded proprietor. Hatfield never needed to hear a man's voice but once, in order to recognize it again, and he had heard Tynsdale speaking at the Palace Hotel when the man had taken his leave.

The clerk rose from his desk and went to the left-hand door. He cleared his throat, took a deep breath and, raising his clenched hand, tapped in a gingerly, almost frightened manner as though rapping at the entrance to a lion's den. Presently a sharp voice said with an irritated ring: "Yes, yes, what is it? Come in."

The lithe Ranger had circled the desk and stood so that he would not be in line when the door opened. The young man turned the brass knob and stood at attention. "Sir," he said, "Mr. Spoffendorf is here."

"Very well," snapped the man in the office. "I'll be with him in a moment. Tell him to wait." He called loudly, "Palacio! Bring me the Spoffendorf correspondence at once."

The clerk smiled at Hatfield and seemed relieved that the ordeal of speaking to the lion in his den was over.

"Just a minute, sir."

It was but a brief wait until a bell tinkled and the clerk nodded to the Ranger. "You may go right in, sir."

Hatfield turned the knob and entered Tynsdale's office. He shut the door behind him and stood there, looking at his man. He had not had much time in which to study Tynsdale during the brief interlude at Stuart's Ford, but now the sunlight streamed in at the side windows and he had a real look at the stout master.

Tynsdale was perhaps thirty-five. Seated at the polished desk his paunch was hidden by the furniture. He had thin lips set between his brownish goatee and clipped mustache, discolored where numerous cigars had rubbed. Over his prom-

inent cheekbones the flesh was taut and marred by little red blotches of broken veins, the high color of a gourmet and heavy drinker.

But after a searching over all look, it was Tynsdale's eyes which Hatfield fixed upon. They protruded like cold marbles and seemed to stab into the visitor. Myriad little wrinkles and lines radiated from the corners. They were the eyes of a ruthless and commanding personality who would stop at nothing, decided the Ranger.

"Sit down, Spoffendorf, sit down." Tynsdale essayed a smile, the seams of his face deepening. He took a fat cigar from a carved box and pushed the case across the desk. "Smoke up."

"Thanks, suh." The Ranger selected an expensive Havana and lighted it, but Tynsdale preferred to chew on his weed for a time. The man picked up a sheaf of papers. In baskets on the desk were many such reports and piles of correspondence.

"Look here," began Tynsdale with acerbity. "I'm a seller of powder and not here to give advice to the lovelorn rebels you represent. After this confine your letters to simple statements of fact. I'll furnish you a hundred or a thousand barrels of gunpowder, but the rights and wrongs of your case mean exactly zero to me. And I don't manufacture cartridges, but I can recommend a good firm. Sub rosa, of course, confidentially, just as this deal with me must be. There's a Federal law against gunrunnin'."

He shot a hard look at Hatfield and reached for a match to light his cigar.

"Since you intend to use this powder for breaching and such purposes," he went on, "I have had the percentage of sulphur increased to speed up the rate of burning. You have almost a blasting powder. You perhaps know that gunpowder is a mixture of charcoal, saltpetre and sulphur. The sulphur vapor spreads the flame through the charge.

"We have every facility here for large output. We make our own charcoal. The nitrate is imported and brought in ships to our own wharf. A cartel has got hold of most of the domestic sulphur supply and jacked the price, but I expect to solve that problem before long. At the moment I must charge more per barrel. You have the cash with you, I suppose. This sort of thing is always on the barrel head, of course."

THE man was obviously a supplier of explosives and so long as he got his money he did not care where they went. At the time Hatfield knew of half a dozen wars going on throughout the world. There were rebellions to the south, across the Mexican border and in South and Central America, in Europe, and fighting in Asia and Africa. On the frontier were quarrels with Indians and between large bands of white men as well.

Gunpowder was a coveted and vital necessity in all these disputes. Tynsdale was in a position to make quick fortunes with his factory.

As the Ranger turned this over in his mind he could hear the clock on the wall ticking.

"Come, come, Spoffendorf," Tynsdale snapped impatiently. "*Hora fugit*—time flies. If you wish to win you must be ready to strike hard and fast. *Periculum in mora*—there is danger in delay."

"Sorry, suh," drawled the Ranger. "But yuh got me mixed up with someone else. I ain't Spoffendorf. My handle is Hatfield."

Tynsdale started with such violence that his knees hit the underside of his desk. His eyes popped out and began to blaze.

"What! You're not Spoffendorf? Twill!"

He bellowed the clerk's name, and banged the bell at his hand.

"Take it easy," ordered Hatfield. "I want a word with you, Mr. Tynsdale." He put respect into his voice, for he wanted to impress the bearded man and not antagonize him until he could discover just what Tynsdale was up to in the Yellow Hills.

There was a timid tap on the door. Tynsdale was glaring at the interloper and rattling the sheaf of papers. The cigar revolved in his wet lips and he snorted angrily.

"I mean business," said the Ranger.

One slim hand rested close to the holstered Colt at his bunched hip and he moved the fingers tentatively, a play which Tynsdale did not fail to see.

"Tell him never mind," commanded Hatfield. "I don't want to hurt anybody if I

can help it."

Some of the hot rage left Tynsdale and he grew more calculating as respect and fear for the armed young man before him took hold. There was an underlying threat to Tynsdale in the soft drawl of the big fellow, and Tynsdale's eyes narrowed.

"Never mind, Twill," he sang out, and sat quiet.

"Just what is it you want?" inquired Tynsdale. "I'd be pleased to know why you posed as Spoffendorf to force your way in here."

"I didn't, suh. But that's neither here nor there. I'd have got to you one way or another."

Tynsdale was regarding him with corrugated brows.

"Have we met before?" he asked. "You have a familiar look."

"Never really met, but we were face to face one evenin' in Stuart's Ford."

Again Tynsdale was startled, and this time really alarmed. He tried to dissemble, repeating "Stuart's Ford, eh?"

"That's right. I just come from there."

Tynsdale waited, watching him. Hatfield noted that the man had fine white hands, too small for such a large man, as Tynsdale began to drum on the desk with two fingers of his right hand. One-two-three. One-two.

The thuddings were repeated. Unconsciously Hatfield's attention was caught by the diamonds that flashed in the gold settings of Tynsdale's rings and by the jeweled stickpin stuck in his white stock. His clothing was expensive and in the height of fashion.

A warning suddenly prickled the Ranger's spine. He was seated facing Tynsdale, and at his back was the small side door which led into the other offices. He hitched his chair around quickly, just in time to see the silent opening of that door. The morose figure of Palacio appeared.

"The cuss signaled him with his tappin'," decided the alert Ranger.

Tynsdale's furious eyes warned Palacio but too late for the big Ranger was up and had a Colt rising and cocked under his thumb.

"Come on in," ordered Hatfield.

The slim Palacio's dark face was sharp. His thin shoulders were stooped and his dark eyes were set in deep pits. They had a gloomy, glowing light. His arms were too long and yellow hands like claws hung at the ends of them. All in all he reminded the Ranger of a dangerous serpent.

PALACIO said nothing, did not move. He saw the gun and his master frozen in his chair behind the desk. But he did not obey Hatfield's command.

"Tell him to step inside and close the door, Tynsdale. I don't aim to shoot, but the first slug goes for you if yuh force me."

Tynsdale knew this masterful tall man meant what he said.

"Come in and shut the door," he growled, and Palacio obeyed, standing in front of the door with his long arms relaxed at his slender hips.

"I'll get to the point," began Hatfield in a businesslike tone. "First off, I'm after the same thing you are, and that's money."

Palacio never took his burning eyes off the Ranger. Hatfield knew that under his black coat would be a pistol, and that no doubt he carried a knife as well. And Hatfield knew the man would die if need be to protect Tynsdale. Palacio was ready to spring.

"Yuh have heard that Dowie Burke lost out over there—you know where?" went on the Ranger. "A handful of farmers chased his bunch all the way to Jericho."

Hatfield carefully slipped his Colt back into the holster as he watched Tynsdale. He could tell that Burke's defeat was no news to the man for Tynsdale only gave a brief shrug. A curtain had been drawn across the glassy blue eyes, as Tynsdale simply waited to see and hear what would occur.

Probing at Tynsdale, Hatfield realized that his idea was correct. Dowie Burke was only a hireling, and while dangerous in the field, could be dealt with. It was Sidney Tynsdale who was the real menace to the people about Stuart's Ford. If Burke died there would be others sent by Tynsdale to carry out his purposes.

"Burke is stupid," said the Ranger coolly, puffing at his cigar. "Why, he'd hardly got to work before those folks knew he was around and operatin'! They found Styles' body and Burke was beat off and nearly captured at Jordan's."

Tynsdale knew just what he was talking about. He was tense and he was grow-

ing more and more alarmed at the extent of the caller's information. But he was too shrewd to add anything to this fund and still waited without speaking.

Hatfield searched for a word, something that would nudge Tynsdale into exposing himself. He had a baffled feeling, for Tynsdale was hard to get at. Sure of his power, the powder magnate had a tough ego. He was silently struggling against the spell of the big fellow.

"Yuh want to get rid of certain men in the neighborhood of Stuart's Ford," said Hatfield flatly. "Ain't that right?"

Tynsdale only shrugged. "How long do you expect to keep jawin'?" he muttered, biting at his cigar. "I'm a busy man."

It was then that Jim Hatfield played his top card.

CHAPTER XII

Explosives

REACHING into his shirt pocket, Hatfield brought forth the smudged list of death. He unfolded it and slid it across the shiny desk top under Tynsdale's nose.

"Burke is so dumb," he said, "that he lost this and I got it. That's yore handwritin', Tynsdale."

The cigar traveled in frantic circles and Tynsdale would not look directly at Hatfield for a time. Then he said:

"Are you a law officer?"

The Ranger gave a surprised laugh.

"Shucks no! So that's what's eatin' yuh. Yuh figger I'm a snoopy sheriff on yore trail. Why, I'm here to join up with yuh if yuh'll have me. I told yuh all I want is to make money."

Both Tynsdale and Palacio seemed to feel better.

"Burke is all right as a gunslinger, but he has no finesse," continued the Ranger. "Yuh're a smart hombre and yuh must savvy that by this time. He's done for around Stuart's Ford. He only got two men on this list yuh gave him—old Styles and John Phelps. If he shows up there again they'll rise and tear him to pieces, and he might even squawk and fetch you into it if it come to that. I'm a different kind of Indian, Tynsdale. I'll guarantee to bring the jobs off for yuh without any fuss."

Tynsdale was growing interested. The earnest sureness and the flashing speed of the tall man before him could not fail to impress.

"Since you have the list," suggested Tynsdale, "why not go ahead and carry it out?"

"Would yuh pay me then? And if so how much?"

Tynsdale was silent again. He was troubled and kept darting glances at the bronzed, rugged face. He was a clever operator, thought Hatfield.

Hatfield kept trying. "Burke is no good to us any more and neither are his gunhands. They're all spotted over there."

For a moment he thought that Sidney Tynsdale meant to open up, but they were interrupted by a timid tap at the front door.

"Oh, Mr. Tynsdale," Twill called. "Mr. Burke is here."

Tynsdale looked at Hatfield. The play was up to the Ranger.

"Tell him to send Burke right in," ordered Hatfield.

He rose and glided to a point where the opening door would hide him from anyone entering. Tynsdale repeated his instruction to the clerk outside. Presently the door was pushed in and Dowie Burke came in, grinning widely.

Burke had on fresh clothing and wore his guns. He shut the door by kicking it with his heel and advanced toward the desk with his hand outstretched.

"Howdy, boss. Mighty good to see yuh. Yuh had my message? It was tough, but we did get Phelps and Styles."

Burke stopped smiling and paused in the middle of the velvet carpet to lick his lips. His blue-whiskered jaw stuck out, and he frowned.

Tynsdale put his hands behind his head and leaned back in his chair. He gave a brief nod at Hatfield and Dowie Burke slowly turned. His horrified gaze fixed on the Ranger, who was slouched against the wall. With a rat's squeak in his throat Dowie Burke went for his Colt.

But his blunt hand froze to the walnut stock of his heavy revolver. He knew when he was beaten and he knew the speed of Jim Hatfield when he wanted to show that his draw was blinding. Burke

was staring into the black muzzle of the big Colt and he watched with fascination for the tall man's thumb to raise. That would be the end of Burke.

"Well?" snarled Burke at last.

"Let yore hands drop and sit down in that chair, Burke," said the Ranger contemptuously, and Dowie carefully obeyed. Tynsdale was savagely amused at Burke's discomfiture. Hatfield believed that the man must be angry at Burke's fumbling work.

"You fool, Burke!" said Tynsdale coldly. "You led this man to me. Suppose he should be a law officer?"

Dowie Burke gulped. He was fully aware of the big man standing behind him and was unable for a moment to offer any excuses.

"He even has the list I gave you," accused Tynsdale.

Burke jumped in his seat but took care not to make any move which might be construed as going for a weapon.

"So you was the one I had the fight with that night at Jordan's!" he cried.

"That was me, Dowie," boasted the Ranger. "Yuh're a jack."

BURKE took in a gasp of air. He could see that his influence with Tynsdale and his own reputation as a tough were rapidly disintegrating.

"That big galoot there is a friend of Moss Jordan's and Ben Naler's," he yelled angrily. "He wrecked my game, Tynsdale! He saved Naler's life the other night in the Palace just when we had the cuss where we wanted him!"

"Shore I saved Naler," said the Ranger instantly. "He's my pardner. We're in business together."

"And what's your business exactly?" said Tynsdale.

"Hosses. There's some mighty fine ones at Jordan's, and we were after 'em. Fact is we aimed to run 'em off that night but Burke horned in on us. If yuh want a job done by real salty hombres, Tynsdale, yuh can't pick better men than Naler and me. We've operated all across Texas without bein' suspected."

"I'm not after horses," said Tynsdale drily. He was regaining his aplomb. He was sure now that the startling visitor must be an outlaw, who was seeking to enlist with him.

"Whatever yuh're after, yuh'll get it if yuh trust me," declared Hatfield.

Burke's ugly face was red and he was badly shaken. His stock had dropped to zero and he had lost what he considered a great thing, the confidence and pay of Sidney Tynsdale.

"*Humanum est errare,*" said Tynsdale solemnly. "'To err is human,' but you have wrecked my plans, Burke."

"Yuh mean I'm through?" growled Dowie.

Tynsdale shrugged. "*Nous verrons ce que nous verrons*—we shall see. You're living at the same place?"

"Yes, suh."

"Go back there and hole up. I'll send you word soon."

Twill's voice reached them, alarmed and shrill.

"But you cannot go in there, sir. Mr. Tynsdale is busy."

"Got to, hombre," Naler's voice answered. "My pard's inside."

"Everything under control, Ben!" Hatfield called. He realized that Naler, having seen Dowie Burke enter, had grown worried and was trying to force his way in. To Tynsdale he said, "That's my pal, Ben Naler. He's all right—nothin' to worry about. Leave it all to us."

"Do I have to stay here?" snapped Burke.

"Nope," said the Ranger. "Go on. But keep out of my sight."

Burke rose and stalked out. He passed Ben Naler in the anteroom and gave Naler a scowl but hurried on. He bumped into a worried-looking middle-aged man in cowboy garb who was coming in.

"Mebbe I'm late," Hatfield heard that man say. "I'm Dave Spoffendorf. Got an appointment to see Mr. Tynsdale."

Hatfield felt that he had pushed Tynsdale as far as he could at the moment. Tynsdale would want to think it all over. The Ranger hoped he had impressed the gunpowder manufacturer and that Tynsdale would later take him into his confidence. But of this he could not be sure, for Tynsdale was a most wary person.

"S'pose I come back tomorrer, Mr. Tynsdale?" he said respectfully. "Yuh can decide by then what yuh want to do. I ain't the one to force myself on a feller."

Tynsdale blinked. He nodded and there was a narrowing of the marble eyes.

Palacio watched Hatfield, not speaking.

"Where can I find you if I want you?" inquired Tynsdale, as Hatfield started out the door.

"Oh, I'll be around. Probably drink and eat at Tony's Metropolitan tonight."

As the Ranger left the private office Ben Naler was glad to see his tall comrade and gripped Hatfield's shoulder as they went outside.

"I was afeared Burke and Tynsdale might down yuh," he said in a low voice. "Hope yuh didn't mind me comin' in."

"That's all right, Naler. Burke come alone?"

"Yeah. There he goes."

Dowie Burke had mounted a yellow mustang and was moving up the street. He looked back and saw Naler and Hatfield, but only turned and kept going.

Naler and Hatfield crossed to their horses and mounted.

"Any luck?" Naler asked eagerly.

Hatfield shrugged. "I ain't shore yet, Ben. I did my best to impress Tynsdale, but he's as hard as the diamonds he sports. I could swear he's behind all that trouble, but I don't savvy why. That's one thing puzzles me. Another is how powerful an organization Tynsdale may have here in Houston. He hired Dowie Burke just for the work around the Yellow Hills. One thing's certain. We'll have to watch our step around town. Tynsdale ain't past havin' us taken care of."

THEY saw Burke put spurs to his horse and take the first corner. Evidently he was afraid that Hatfield and Naler meant to come for him. But the Ranger and his tall rancher friend showed no such signs as they moved away from the powder factory, which hummed busily, black smoke pouring from the chimneys. Hatfield rode in silence, his chin down.

"What now, Jim?" Naler asked presently.

"We'll hang around and take it easy today," said the officer. "A rest won't hurt either of us after the way we been goin'. Let Tynsdale simmer a while."

He had an uncomfortable sensation in the back of his neck and kept glancing around. The sunlight glinted on the windows of Tynsdale's office, but he could see nothing amiss. . . .

Houston hummed with antlike activity through the day. Hatfield and Naler did some sightseeing and napped in the hot afternoon. They partook of the sumptious free lunch at Tony's Metropolitan and then went out again for a stroll when darkness was at hand.

Hatfield walked with no purpose for a time, deep in thought. He only grunted or nodded in reply to Naler's comments. At last the Ranger made up his mind..

"I'm goin' over to stable and pick up Goldy, Ben," he said. "I aim to visit Tynsdale's home and see if I can find out anything more. I don't feel comfortable."

"I'm with yuh," Naler promptly declared.

Hatfield had obtained the address of Tynsdale's mansion from the city directory. They went back to the livery stable and, saddling up, rode along the bayou highway. When they had left the city behind there were fine homes on the heights.

One of these was Sidney Tynsdale's. It stood in parked grounds and there was a high iron picket fence about it. Iron stags and other statues were placed about the carefully tended lawns. The front gate stood wide open and the big house was brightly lighted, but there was a uniformed attendant at the main entrance.

"Looks like Tynsdale is entertainin' this evenin'," remarked the Ranger as they rode on around the block.

CHAPTER XIII

Thumbs Down

FAINTLY the wind brought the strains of music from the mansion through the open windows, for the night was warm. The Ranger hunted a way inside the grounds, hoping to spot Tynsdale and learn something more about his quarry.

The high spiked fence Hatfield discovered ran all the way around the grounds. He and Naler were almost back to the front street before they came to the service entrance, a marked gate in the palisades, but this was locked and dark. However, the Ranger got an idea, as he looked up at the big oak tree whose limbs extended over the walk.

"Wait with the hosses across the street, Naler," ordered Hatfield. "I'm goin' in."

From Goldy's back it was easy to reach a strong limb of the oak and pull himself up and over the spikes. Naler then led Goldy across the road to the shadows of some scrub growth in the vacant lot there.

The silent Ranger picked spots of cover and flitted in. There were many sounds coming from the mansion—music, the buzzing hum of many people in laughing talk, the clatter of dishes in the kitchen. There was a banquet going on and in the big dining room a long table set with snowy linen and silver service was laden with good things to eat for Tynsdale's guests.

From his vantage point outside a French window giving into the big room, the Ranger could see the assemblage, the men in evening clothes and the ladies gorgeous in silk gowns and jewels. At the host's position sat Sidney Tynsdale in faultless evening attire, his bearded face smiling. Wine was flowing and uniformed servitors passed silver platters of meats, vegetables, and various vintages.

Most of the male guests had the look which comes with power and importance, and some were plainly foreign. Hatfield could not make out much of the small talk but concluded that this was an affair which Tynsdale had given for business as well as social purposes. Such a man as the gunpowder manufacturer would need high contacts.

He did not see Palacio, but after he had been watching for a half-hour the lugubrious-looking bodyguard came through from the rear of the house and stood at Tynsdale's elbow. The man's master stopped his conversation, excusing himself, and followed Palacio through the swinging door.

"What now?" wondered Hatfield.

He moved along the stone wall, skirting the shrubbery, and reached more open windows. They gave into a library in a wing between the dining room and the kitchens. Here he located Tynsdale and Palacio, and Dowie Burke stood with his hat in hand before his employer.

"You shouldn't have come here, Burke," said Tynsdale sharply. "I told you that before. You gave me away once. What do you want?"

Burke was pleading and almost humble. "I wish yuh'd give me another chance, boss. I couldn't talk today with Naler and that big rascal around. But they're the ones wrecked us in the Yellow Hills. I'm enlistin' new men and I guarantee to bring it off right this time."

"You shouldn't have come here," repeated Tynsdale coldly. He took a cigar from a box on the table and lighted it as he thought. Then he said, "However, I'll give you another chance, Burke. You'll be at the same address, the one you gave me?"

"Yes suh," replied Burke eagerly.

"Go home now and wait for me. I'll be along to see you, probably around ten or eleven o'clock, as soon as I can get away from the party. We can talk at your place."

"*Bueno!*" cried Burke, and seized Tynsdale's hand, pumping it. "Yuh'll find I'll deliver the goods this time, boss."

"Do you know where Naler and the other one are stayin' in town?" inquired Tynsdale.

"No suh. I hope to find out, though. I tell you yuh can't trust either of 'em." Burke spoke earnestly.

Tynsdale put a hand on Burke's burly shoulder with bluff good comradeship.

"Run along, then. You came in by the service gate, Palacio tells me. The guard will let you out the same way. You must not be seen around here."

Dowie Burke nodded and went out. Tynsdale remained smoking in the library and when Palacio returned after seeing Burke out a side door the manufacturer said:

"Go to Vance at once, Palacio. Tell him to include Burke and his men. I'm through with the whole bunch."

The blue eyes bulged with icy coldness. There was a vicious look on Tynsdale's bearded face and the cigar twirled between his wet lips.

"*Pollice versa,*" he said, and put both thumbs down, the condemnation to death.

Palacio nodded and slipped away, his master returning to the banquet. . . .

OUTSIDE the Tynsdale grounds, Ben Naler had drawn well back out of sight with Goldy and his own horse. He had taken the precaution of muzzling his bay gelding for sometimes the horse would call to him when he left the animal stand-

ing. He had dropped the reins and gone to a point from which he could see the big oak tree and the service gate. He squatted in the shadows to await the Ranger's return.

Naler thought of all that had happened since he had left his ranch across the Pecos. He had crossed Texas and, having heard of Moss Jordan's elegant Kentucky horses, had reached Stuart's Ford and visited Jordan's. There his whole life had been changed. He mused on the strangeness of fate. Connie had first fascinated him, and now she held him with an invisible, unbreakable chain. He would never be the same carefree bachelor he had been when he had left home.

All his hopes now centered on the girl. Everything he planned in the future would include her.

"That is," he thought, "if she'll have me. I hope Hatfield is right. I wonder if I got a chance?"

When he had gone back to Jordan's after the first visit it had not been to argue over buying the thoroughbreds. There were other breeders. He had gone back because he could not stay away from Connie. He could picture her in his mind, her smiling eyes and the way the wind disturbed her golden hair.

"She's finished the dishes," he thought. "And she'll be sittin' there with her dad and mebbe Mrs. Phelps. Readin', I'll bet, or sewin'."

He had stayed to help Jordan in the fight against Dowie Burke, on account of Connie. And he was with Hatfield in Houston on the same score. But even so, some of it had been on the Ranger's account. Hatfield's power and ability had impressed Naler greatly. He would swear by and follow him anywhere, and admiration for the big officer filled him.

A horseman approached the service gate and Naler tensed, peering from behind his clump of brush. The rider looked around once, then dismounted and rang a bell which had a cord within reach of the outsider. There was something familiar about the caller's figure, but it was dark and Naler could not recognize the man.

After a while a lantern came into view and a uniformed guard held it up from inside the bars. The yellow rays shone on Dowie Burke's ugly features and Naber was sure then who the visitor was.

"I got to see Mr. Tynsdale," he heard Burke say. "It's mighty important. Tell Palacio if yuh want."

The gate was unlocked. Dowie Burke went inside and followed the bearer of the light toward the mansion.

Burke's appearance worried Naler, just as it had that morning. He wondered what Dowie wanted with Tynsdale, and if Burke might bump into Hatfield around the grounds. At last he crossed the road and moved to the gate. Burke's mustang stood with dropped reins in the gutter. Naler argued with himself on whether or not to try and follow the Ranger. Should he go over the fence and be ready in case Burke made trouble? But then he shook his head. Hatfield would be hidden and out of the light.

He could see Burke and the guard as they reached the back door of the mansion. Strains of music and louder talk and laughter came to Naler.

"I'll go back and wait like he told me to," he thought.

A faint sound caused him to look around quickly and his hand flew to his Colt. But it was too late. He got his left arm up enough so that it partially deflected the descending carbine barrel, but the steel cracked the side of his head and he went down with a startled grunt.

He was almost knocked out and unable to do more than gasp. Three men were on him and they fell heavily so their weight pinned him and knocked out his wind.

Then Naler blacked out and went limp. He remembered nothing more. . . .

WHEN Ben Naler came back to life he was lying on a wooden floor with hands and ankles trussed. A lamp on a box table in the center of the room gave light. A big bed with a dirty blanket spread on it stood against the wall and there were some chairs, old clothing and other things about. It was a combination bedroom and sitting room. He could see through a door into a front chamber but this was unlit save from the opening between the two.

Tobacco smoke and whisky fumes filled the bedroom. The curtains were tightly drawn and it was stuffy. Naler was aware of several pairs of legs around the table.

He breathed heavily, then someone said:

"He's awake, Dowie."

Naler knew then that Dowie Burke's men had jumped him, tied him, and brought him here. Burke's face was red from liquor and heat as he came over to spurn Naler with a sharp toe.

"I got yuh at last," he growled. "Yuh're goin' to pay for what yuh've done."

There was no mercy in Dowie Burke. He hated Naler and would kill him at the drop of the hat. There were four more outlaws in the little shack and from sounds outside Naler thought this must be Houston.

"All I need now is that big galoot yuh travel with and then it will be perfect," rumbled Dowie. "I'll cook him, too. Yuh're goin' to help me catch him, Naler. Yuh'll tell me where Hatfield is and what yore game is. Yuh ruined me with Tynsdale, but I'll make up by showin' what yuh really are."

Burke's desire to reinstate himself in Tynsdale's good graces dominated him.

"Come on," he ordered. "Where's that sidewinder livin'? I want to take him tonight. We found yore hoss in the bushes but not his. He didn't go out to Tynsdale's, did he? Sent you to spy there, I s'pose."

At least they had not captured the Ranger, thought Naler. And somehow the golden sorrel had evaded them. Naler's gelding would have stood with his reins down but Goldy must have moved off when he heard strangers approaching, so Burke had concluded that Hatfield was not around. Burke, wanting to surprise Tynsdale by the capture of both Naler and the Ranger, had hustled to his city hideout with Ben Naler. Now he meant to nab Hatfield.

Naler's hands were fastened behind him and his limbs ached. He had lost his hat and they had taken his guns. But he was still stubborn and would not answer Burke's questions as to his partner's whereabouts.

"All right," said Burke. "I'll show yuh. One of my grand-pappies was an Apache. I learned some tricks from the old fool. Gag him, Bert!"

CHAPTER XIV

Missing Pard

DOWIE BURKE'S eyes burned his hate of Naler. He blamed his failure in the Yellow Hills entirely on the rancher and on Hatfield.

An outlaw tied a kerchief tightly across Naler's mouth and Burke picked up a long steel pin and held it over the lamp chimney. When it was glowing red-hot he thrust the point into Naler's cheek. A spasm of pain made the victim writhe. Burke pricked him in several places before the pin cooled. Then Dowie went to reheat it. As he held it over the lamp he talked to Naler.

"At first yuh'll tell yoreself yuh're too tough to crack, Naler. Yuh'll stand it. But each sizzle of yore flesh takes a little more out of yuh. After while yuh'll be weak as a kitten. Then I'll start on yore eyes. I'll blind one and if yuh don't talk by then I'll blind the other. I'll take

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yuh to pieces, bit by bit. No man could stand it. Yuh'll be cryin' like a baby soon."

He finished heating the pin and Naler could feel the terrible jab of it even before Dowie used it. Squatted over the rancher, Burke made a tentative threat of jabbing his eyes. Naler closed them and turned his head aside. Dowie laughed.

"I'll have somethin' to deliver to the boss tonight," exulted Burke. "Yuh might as well squawk, Naler. I'll get yore pard sooner or later anyway and yuh can save yoreself a lot of torture by talkin'. Where's he livin'? You savvy. What's the game? Just who is he, and what's he doin' in this?"

Naler set his soul to stand anything. He would not betray his friend, but Burke had been right. He could feel himself growing weaker with each spasm of pain, as Dowie punctured his skin with the hot needle.

"Now for the first eye," Burke said grimly, as he again heated the pin.

A strip of thick leather wound around the cooler end of the pin protected Burke's blunt fingers. Dowie turned and brought the red-hot point slowly toward Naler's left eye, and again Naler turned his head away.

"Hold his ears, Fan," said Burke, and one of the outlaws roughly gripped Naler and wrenched the rancher's head around.

A loud knocking at the street door made them jump.

"See who it is," commanded Burke.

The man called Bert glided through to the outer room. Dowie pushed the connecting door part way to and they stood ready with their pistols. Voices came from up front. Then Bert came back.

"It's all right, Dowie," he reported. "It's an hombre with a message from Tynsdale."

"*Bueno.*" Dowie set the pin on a dish and strode out. His men trailed him.

Naler lay behind the table on the floor and the big bed bulked close at hand. The connecting door stood at right angles and cut off Naler's vision as far as the front door went.

It was a respite but a brief one, thought the rancher, his cheeks burning from the smarting punctures.

"Vance?" he heard Burke saying inquiringly, "Is Tynsdale comin'?"

There was a sudden hoarse cry and heavy guns began to roar. The burst of sound was overwhelming and stunning. A man screamed, but only once.

Ben Naler was aware of the terrific commotion in the outer room. He rolled himself over with the spasmodic desperation of self-preservation, back under the wide wooden bed and lay there panting, with his body pressed to the wall.

His shift of position made it possible for him to see a section of the front room's floor, although the low sideboard of the wide bed cut off the view so he could only take in the moving men as far as their knees. He could make out two bodies lying on the mat and the unmoving black boots of a third. They looked like Burke's bunch.

The front door was wide open. The running pairs of legs came toward him, several charging men, and their weight shook the wooden shack. A couple came swiftly through to check the bedroom.

"Empty," growled one. "We got 'em all, Vance."

A hard voice, a leader's curt tones, ordered: "We'll burn the place down."

One man swept the oil lamp from the table. Naler saw it crash and the glass reservoir, filled with kerosene, cracked open. The oil ran out on the floor but the lighted wick doused out. Matches were struck and touched to the pool of spreading oil which flared up and caught flaming hold.

"Two constables just come around the next corner, Vance," warned a lookout from the open door.

"Come on!" said Vance. "Let's get out before the law gets here."

The fire was picking up and licking at the wooden wall. The straw mat was ablaze. The voice of the fire increased, an ominous *whooshing* which grew toward a roaring threat of death. Smoke was drifting on the drafts.

The booted legs flashed away and vague shouts came to the confused Naler, tied, and under the bed. . . .

WHILE Ben Naler was facing a death from torture, Jim Hatfield had spent over an hour out at Tynsdale's mansion. After Palacio had been ordered to have Burke killed by someone he called Vance, the lugubrious Spaniard had sad-

dled a fleet horse and left by the front gates.

The Ranger did not know where Burke was living and he knew he could never get back to Goldy and trail Palacio in the night. He concluded that the Vance mentioned by Tynsdale must be a strong-arm merchant who worked for the gunpowder manufacturer. Burke would have to take his chance.

Hatfield went back to the window looking in on the banquet hall and saw Tynsdale resume his chair and smilingly entertain the company. One course after another came on—appetizers, soup, fish, entree, main course, desserts, with wine to accompany each, and cordials and cigars for the gentlemen after the ladies had retired to the drawing room. Tynsdale appeared to be set for the evening.

At last the Ranger left his post of observation and picked his line of retreat.

He went up the dark side of the big oak and sat for a few moments in the lower branches, scanning the road and side street, making sure all was clear. He saw nobody, and his eyes hunted for Naler for a time.

"He's keepin' well hid," he thought approvingly.

Dropping to the sidewalk outside the high iron fence the Ranger flitted across to the black area of brush and trees. He was sure Naler would hail him in a second for, if watching, Naler would surely have seen him coming.

Hatfield glanced back and, keeping down low, gave a low hail.

"Ben!"

There was no answer. Hatfield was mildly puzzled and kept going. Perhaps Naler had gone back to keep the horses quiet. He moved into the thickets, peering through the dark lanes. The Ranger knew that Naler would have led the animals well back out of sight of the road.

He paused and once more called in a sharp undertone:

"Ben! Naler, where are yuh?"

Listening intently, all he could hear were muted strains of music and a far-off chatter of voices from Tynsdale's party in the great mansion.

Hatfield squatted in the center of the little woods, and stroked his chin. Then he began casting about, hunting Naler. It was possible that the rancher might have dozed off, waiting for him. But he could not locate the man. Nor could he find the horses. Had Naler grown alarmed by something and ridden off, with Goldy in tow?

All the way through the patch of brush and low trees, Hatfield turned back and tried again. He essayed a quick whistle. He listened intently and caught the sound of trotting hoofs coming toward him. He whistled a second time, and soon Goldy broke through to him and nuzzled his hand.

"Where's Naler, Goldy? What happened?"

But the golden sorrel only sniffed, glad to see his friend.

It was a puzzle, and Hatfield was alarmed. It was not like Naler to desert him.

"Mebbe he saw Dowie Burke and follered him," he mused, thinking it out.

Should he wait for the rancher, or move on? He glanced toward the mansion. He could see the brightly lighted windows through the branches.

For half an hour he hung around, hoping Naler would return. Impatient at the delay he went back over the spiked fence by jumping up and getting hold of a branch of the oak.

The party was still going on. They had finished dinner, and dancing had begun in the ballroom. Tynsdale, his bearded face wreathed in smiles, was dancing with a stout bejeweled lady. There seemed to be no alarm, nothing to indicate that Naler had been captured and brought to Tynsdale.

Hatfield returned to Goldy. He decided that Naler must have trailed Dowie Burke.

Naler would never quit except for a reason such as this.

"We'll go back to the city and he'll come home when he's good and ready," the Ranger murmured to Goldy.

He considered the possibility that Naler might have been jumped and downed. If so, they had found his horse and taken him along. Had he been certain that Naler was a prisoner he would have gone back and tried to capture Tynsdale, anything to force the issue, make Tynsdale tell where Burke could be located in case Dowie had managed to pick up Naler. But he was sure of nothing.

MOUNTING, the Ranger rode back to the center of the city. He smoked as he went, and the moon gleamed on the restless waters of Buffalo Bayou. Houston was warming up downtown as the revelry of night grew livelier and livelier.

Hatfield rode along a wide avenue. Off to his left he noted a red glow lighting the night sky.

"Looks like a house afire," he muttered and debated on whether to go watch the blaze or not.

But he was weary and wanted a drink. The fire was somewhere in the slums behind the waterfront, and a long ride from where he was.

Just on the chance that Naler might have gone home, Hatfield went around by way of the furnished room they shared, but his friend had not come in. So the Ranger rode on toward Tony's Metropolitan. Naler would show up there for a drink and a snack if the rancher went anywhere before going home.

The street was crowded with saddle horses and with fine carriages and buggies. He had to leave Goldy halfway up the long block from Tony's. He ducked under the rail, went up the sidewalk, and turned into the bar.

It was filled with men. Busy aproned attendants served the customers. Glasses clinked and liquor flowed. Talk was loud and there was dancing going on, and gambling upstairs. The saloon was bright and warm and, after buying a long drink, Hatfield visited the free lunch counters. He kept looking around for Ben Naler, but did not see his comrade.

Uneasy, and growing more and more so as Naler failed to appear, Hatfield had a couple of drinks.

Behind the long bar which ran through from street to street, entrances at both ends of the building, were gleaming mirrors reaching to the ceiling. Racks of bottles of every known brand of "poison" stood on the mahogany shelves. There were cigars and pipe and chewing tobacco, matches, toothpicks, and fruits, all that might be desired by a finicky and thirsty customer. The cuspidors were shining brass.

It was decidedly pleasant at the Metro, but the atmosphere brought Jim Hatfield no relief.

CHAPTER XV

Clash

IT WAS Hatfield's custom to go on the assumption that he might be in danger at all times. He was ever wary, especially when working on such a case as this. He knew that Sidney Tynsdale was a dangerous opponent, and Houston was Tynsdale's bailiwick.

Tynsdale had sent orders to someone called Vance. Hatfield did not recognize this name. He thought the man must be a local aide of the manufacturer's.

But the Metro was so open and so filled with people that he did not believe anything would be tried in the place. Still, he had mentioned the saloon to Tynsdale as a spot he frequented.

He managed to push in and get a place at the bar, a booted foot on the rail and an elbow hooked over the high counter. He was jostled, but it was all good-natured. The man next him began to talk about the weather, and the price of beef.

A couple more fellows came in but Hatfield barely noticed them, for men were leaving or entering all the time. There was great bustle and noise in the Metro. Hatfield munched a beef sandwich he had brought over from the tables and sipped his drink, exchanging remarks with his bar acquaintance.

The two new arrivals, however, had brought news, which passed along the bar. Hatfield listened as it was relayed down the gossipy line.

"Big fire out on Second Street," said his neighbor, who had caught the talk. "Cabin burned to the ground and they say it was full of dead men! Must have been a fight between two gangs. They're mighty bold in town these days. I don't know what the world's comin' to." The middle-aged city dweller shook his head solemnly.

More details came along. The police had made an arrest. Hatfield thought it over. He had seen the glow of the fire in the night sky as he had ridden back into Houston. It was the fact that men had been shot down that held him. Tynsdale had ordered Dowie Burke's extinction.

Could it have been Burke and his gang who had died out there in the burning cabin? The timing would check with this assumption.

In the mirror he saw a six-foot-tall man in a black suit and hat, white shirt and string tie come in through the door by which the Ranger had entered. The fellow had a startling beard, black as ink and bristling like a porcupine's quills. It fanned out from his chin. If he wore a gun it was under his coat. He had keen, narrowed black eyes, and a hooked nose. There was something about his whole attitude and look which held the Ranger.

"Looks tough," he decided.

Behind Blackbeard came half a dozen more men. Some wore riding garments, others city clothing. They paused and waited as the man with the whiskers looked through the saloon.

"Huntin' somebody," decided the Ranger.

He was troubled, worried over Naler. The news that had come through about the fight and the burning cabin further alarmed him. Was it possible that Burke had captured Naler? If Naler had trailed Dowie and his bunch he might have been present when the shooting occurred, even if he was not a prisoner.

The next instant he glimpsed Palacio's lean figure and solemn dark visage. Palacio was pointing a bony finger at him from the doorway. The secretary had just come in, and stood beside Blackbeard.

The bearded man whipped a hand inside his jacket. He had a pistol in a shoulder holster and was reaching for it. Hatfield knew instantly they had come after him. No doubt that other task set Vance by Tynsdale was to find Hatfield and Naler and kill them. And this black-bearded killer must be Vance.

The Metro was jammed with people. Bullets flying would hit innocent bystanders, and Hatfield was not a man to hurt decent citizens. He could not fire into Vance and Palacio without starting a burst from the drawn guns of the toughs who backed up their chief.

To draw fire from the crowd and to get some sort of bulwark between himself and the enemy guns, the Ranger acted with terrific speed. He threw himself across the bar, kicking out of the way the man he had been talking with and swiping several glasses and bottles off the counter. They crashed to the floor.

The bearded man's gun blasted and a bullet furrowed the mahogany. Several more men opened up and a customer close to where Hatfield had been standing screamed and sagged, gripping his slashed shoulder. The bullets made small holes in the great mirrors, holes with little cracks radiating from them.

THE stampede began as men sought to get away from the blazing guns of the toughs blocking the doors. Behind the bar Hatfield was comparatively safe for the moment. The barkeepers shouted at him but ducked as they heard the zipping lead.

The bar was high enough so that Hatfield could move, stooped over. He wanted to get outside and save others in the saloon from stray lead. He bobbed up and saw Vance and his men moving toward the curving end of the bar from which point they could sweep the aisle and kill him. He had to shoot to slow them. His bullet knocked the bearded fellow's hat off, and made the leader wince and duck.

It was Hatfield's intention to rush out by the opposite exit, to the next block. He was two-thirds down the bar aisle when his heel caught in something and threw him hard on the wet walk behind the bar. It was an iron ring in a trap door.

He was up quickly, Colt in hand. Close by him was a quivering fat bartender, scrunched under the bar where copper tubing came up from the basement. The Ranger bobbed up again to see to Vance and his crew.

He fired once and a bullet cut his hat crown and smacked into the mirror. But it came not from Vance's side but from the other doorway toward which Hatfield was headed. A number of killers had crushed in that way and were after him. There were no windows on the bar side and he was trapped behind the long mahogany counter!

It was pandemonium in the saloon. Men were crying out in agony as they were crushed in the stampeding mob. A confused roar rose and the lamps shook on their gilt chains.

Hatfield was aware by now that Vance would stop at nothing to carry out Tynsdale's orders. The black-bearded man

was utterly ruthless and would strike with smashing power, no matter where. Hatfield was caught between the two bunches of gunslingers, boring in on him. He had only seconds left, for even if he downed a few, they would kill him by sheer weight of numbers.

He whirled and jumped back the way he had come. He had to send a quickie at the bar end for he saw Vance and another man there taking aim at him. Then he reached down, gripped the iron ring, and jerked.

The heavy trap door came up and showed a flight of ladderlike steps going into the cellar.

The Ranger did not hesitate at going down the hatch.

He slipped and went sliding all the way to the bottom, fetching up on a packed dirt floor.

A wet, musty smell greeted his nostrils. There were liquors and casks of beer stowed down here. He could see faint outlines of small windows high up in the walls of the foundation. Overhead the floor of the saloon shook with stamping feet.

Hoarse yells and the roar of the crowd came from above.

He moved a few steps and ran into some cases. He took time to strike a match and the flare showed the big storeroom filled with bottled goods and barrels. An open door led him on into another room where there were more supplies of food and various types of equipment used by Tony's Metro.

He tried another match. A rat as large as a kitten scurried across his boot and disappeared among the boxes.

A shout and a whirling slug told him it was dangerous to strike any more matches. Vance and his boys had followed him.

The basement was large. Over on the far side he found a door which led into an enclosed place. Overhead showed a narrow patch of sky. He charged up the stairs and turned into the side street. It went through to both avenues and the Ranger picked up his feet and ran for it.

He slowed, with his gun up, as he came to the turn. Men were jamming the veranda of the Metro and staring through the open door and the windows at the scene inside. They blocked off Hatfield's enemies. He came out, pushed to the curb, and ducked under the rail.

He ran up the block at full speed and picked up Goldy's reins, springing to his saddle.

His breath rasped in his throat and a slow trickle of blood came from the gash in his scalp. He had felt a sting during the fight in the bar but he had been too busy to take much note of it. A splinter of glass also had jabbed him, and he found he had other scratches and cuts in his face and hands.

HE SAW Vance and his men surge from the alley. They glimpsed him as he passed under a street lamp but he was moving fast and their following lead went wide.

Hatfield made the next corner and took it, his speed increasing, the sorrel springy under him.

The Ranger drew in the night air, pulling himself together. His breath came in heaving gasps and he was badly shaken. Vance's attack had been most savage, and Hatfield had had little warning of it.

In the dark he was able to shake off the killers but they kept blindly pushing along, and soon he realized that Vance had riders on several parallel avenues so he could not double back on them. Twice patrols sighted him and whooped it up, calling to their comrades and shooting at the man on the sorrel.

He was jostled to the western limits of Houston before he managed to work over and lose them entirely.

Anger burned in him, but emotion was not good for clear thought and therefore he stifled it.

"Tynsdale is real sore," he thought. "He's wipin' the slate clean and aims to start over, using this Vance hombre. Tynsdale is smart, and Vance is mighty salty."

Sidney Tynsdale had been clever, the way he had led both Dowie Burke and Hatfield into believing he would use them as his allies. But Tynsdale had given his orders to have Burke and the tall man wiped out. Tynsdale was playing safe. Burke had shown himself to be a dull-witted fool who was dangerous to such an operator as the manufacturer, while Tynsdale would not trust the supposed horse thief who was trying to force his way in.

CHAPTER XVI

"Leave No Stones Unturned"

UNDOUBTEDLY Hatfield would have felt better had he known what had happened to Ben Naler. Vance, of course, was looking for Naler, and the Ranger knew what that meant, for it had taken every ounce of his own fighting ability to escape the smashing strike of the Houston bunch. If they bumped into Naler, the rancher would die.

Back in the Yellow Hills waited Connie Jordan, waited for Ben Naler to return. And Jordan and the inhabitants of the hills must have powerful assistance if they were to survive this next attack by Tynsdale, spearheaded by Blackbeard Vance.

The Ranger made a wide detour to evade possible far flung outriders of Vance's party and approached the lighted city from the south, pressing back to the heart of town. He knew he was a marked man now and liable to be shot on sight by Vance's men. In daylight he would have little chance of surviving for any length of time, for drygulchers with loaded rifles, hidden in buildings and niches outside them, could pick off any horseman.

"I've got to force a break," he decided, his keen mind working at full speed. "Tynsdale is at the head of it all. I'll try for him and before the new day breaks!"

He considered enlisting the Houston police force. They would cooperate with a Texas Ranger even though there might be some professional jealousy. Yet he was aware that such an influential citizen as Sidney Tynsdale would command political forces in the city, and would be a hard man to convict and hold. There would be bail, lawyers fighting, and time would run out. Meanwhile Tynsdale's agents could operate as they pleased and the Ranger might have his hands tied, his countering of Tynsdale exposed.

Again he neared the furnished room house where he had been staying with Naler. There was a chance that Tynsdale knew where it was, so Hatfield left Goldy around the corner and approached with every precaution. He wanted to see if Naler had come home. But the place was dark and there was no sign either of his friend or his enemies.

The Metro had quieted down but he did not go within two blocks of the place. He had made up his mind as to his next play and as usual it was bold, direct, and if it succeeded it might ease the whole situation.

The Ranger headed once more for Sidney Tynsdale's home. He hid Goldy back in the wooded fields and flitted close to the margin of them, peering over at the spiked fence and the big oak by which he had crossed the fence early in the night. It was late and Tynsdale's guests were leaving in elegant equipages. The main gates stood wide open and armed watchmen saluted as each carriage went past.

He drew back and froze close to the ground as riders came to the service gate across the road. He could identify Palacio's lean figure on a big black horse and as the man beside the dark-skinned secretary looked around, Hatfield saw that he wore a spiked black beard.

"Vance!" he thought.

Palacio opened the service gate with a big iron key and the two went through together. They trotted their horses up the winding gravel driveway toward the rear of the mansion.

The Ranger looked carefully at the shadowed area to the right, from which direction the pair had come. It was probable that Vance had men with him and they would surely see the Ranger if he crossed to the oak.

Silently he moved away and, keeping parallel to the long fence, reached the corner of it. It was dark enough so he could cross the street which he did, and he pressed against the black spikes.

He had left his big Stetson behind and dirt rubbed on his face killed the sheen of his skin. Girding himself, he put a toe between the spikes on the narrow joining piece at the bottom. This raised him high enough so he could get hold of the spearlike tops of two uprights. With his strong arms he drew himself up and though his shirt was torn and he was bruised about the ribs he managed to get over the high palings and dropped to the ground inside.

Reconnoitering, he found Palacio and

Vance seated in the study between the kitchens and the dining room. They were drinking and smoking and waiting for Tynsdale, who was saying good night to the last of his dinner guests.

AFTER twenty minutes of waiting Sidney Tynsdale came into the room. The manufacturer's face was grim.

"Well?" he snapped.

"We did somethin', suh," reported Vance. "We got Dowie Burke and his bunch. They're cooked and I mean shore enough cooked for we fired the shack and they burned up. Not one escaped."

"Good work!" exclaimed Tynsdale. He selected a fat cigar and thrust it between his bearded lips.

"Burke didn't have too many brains," said Vance with contempt in his voice. "He fell hook, line and sinker, and it wasn't too hard. He was mighty stupid, chief."

Tynsdale winked and said lightly, "*De mortuis nil nisi bonum*—of the dead say nothing but good, Vance! But you're right. Burke made a lot of trouble for me. How about Naler and Hatfield?"

Palacio spoke quietly. "We have not found the rancher, senor. But the tall devil has been wounded."

"We ran the cuss out of town," boasted Vance. "I'll take him, I guarantee it, Mr. Tynsdale. Set yore mind at rest on that score. He hasn't got a chance. If he shows in Houston again he'll die."

Tynsdale's eyes snapped as he heard of the fight at Tony's Metropolitan.

"But the big one is dangerous," he protested. "He understands now it is *guerra a outrance.* Yes, war to the uttermost. *Nemo me impune lacessit.* No one attacks me with impunity."

"I'll get him," promised Vance. "Write him off. And Naler too."

"*Omnem movere lapidem*—leave no stone unturned," ordered Tynsdale. He loved to impress others with his erudition.

Hatfield crouched beside the open window of the study, hidden in ornamental shrubbery fringing the stone foundations of the great mansion. He could not capture Tynsdale with Vance and Palacio present, and with armed servitors on call.

"I wish to finish up a matter begun in the Yellow Hills, Vance," said Tynsdale. "I gave Dowie Burke a list of property holders there that I wanted put out of my way. It's vital. Burke wrecked the game with his blundering and brought Hatfield and Naler upon my head, as you understand. I must strike in the hills at once. How many men do you command?"

"As many as yuh want," replied Vance. "I only have a couple dozen regulars, but I'll hire as many extras as yuh say. I pay two dollars a day but this job shouldn't run more than a week or so."

"Get fifty or sixty," said Tynsdale. "I don't want any more slips."

Blackbeard Vance was very sure of himself. "I'll fix up the damage Burke done," he declared. "I'll settle their hash in the Yellow Hills. Yuh want me to wait and get Hatfield and Naler before I start over there?"

Tynsdale shook his head quickly. "It's possible that either one may leave Houston and return to warn Jordan and the others about me. I wouldn't put it past them to sell out to those yokels for a price, to spite me. So we must start within twenty-four hours. This time I'll go along so there will be no mistakes."

"Whatever yuh say, suh. But I wish yuh'd come to me first instead of trustin' Dowie Burke."

"At the time it seemed best to use a roving gang such as Burke commanded," explained Tynsdale. "A friend sent Burke to me, and Dowie wanted work. He and his boys were range riders and it fitted in for the job."

Palacio started, and glanced toward the closed door. He raised a long finger to his lips and silently tiptoed to the door. But as he put a hand on the knob a loud rap came and a liveried servant stood waiting as the aide opened up.

"There's a man here to see Mr. Vance, sir."

Vance went out, leaving Palacio and Tynsdale together.

"What do you think of Vance?" asked Tynsdale.

"Senor, I think he is very good just now for us. Later I can't say. He is strong-willed."

Tynsdale nodded. "If Vance goes too far later I'll find a way to check him. *Est modus in rebus.* There is a limit in all things, Palacio."

"Yes, senor."

"I'll be glad to have this affair set-

tled," went on Tynsdale, twirling his cigar between his wet lips. "It's a radical proceeding, but the surest and quickest method."

"Also the cheapest," murmured Palacio, with a nod.

"Yes, it should be. There's no saying what might happen if I'd let our secret slip. I'd be held up for a fortune and might even lose out entirely." Tynsdale was thinking aloud, spinning his ambitions into realities. "It will make a tremendous difference once I've won in the Yellow Hills. I'll command the industry. I'll rival Gould and Vanderbilt. I'll be really big. The world will point with envy at Sidney Tynsdale. I'll settle wars and other great affairs. And why should I care about the fate of a few stupid little people? The end justifies the means. *Exitus acta probat.*"

VANCE came hurrying back into the room, his cheeks red with excitement where the flesh showed over the bristling beard.

"More good news!" he cried. "My men have located Ben Naler."

"Where is he?" demanded Tynsdale.

"In the city hall lockup," replied Vance. "Rumors were all around about Burke and his bunch and the fire of course. One man said the police had taken a prisoner. The place looked empty when I was in but we were pushed and couldn't hunt around. They say that a man was hidden under a bed, that he was tied up but rolled out into sight when the police and firemen arrived. They pulled him out just in time."

"So that's what happened to Naler!" thought the startled Hatfield.

"Why are they holding Naler?" inquired Tynsdale, scowling with puzzled attention.

"Just to check on him, I reckon. I s'pose he's told who he is. Mebbe even mentioned you."

Tynsdale made his decision. He turned to Palacio.

"Ride at once to Judge Swale's," he ordered. "Wake him up and tell him I want a habeas corpus writ at once for Ben Naler. Any name will do. I want a magistrate at the city hall within one hour, understand? We'll get Naler out before he has time to do much damage and before someone beats us to it."

Palacio glided away. "That leaves only the tall one," said Tynsdale to Vance. "Luck's with us tonight. Perhaps we'll get Hatfield before we start for the Yellow Hills. I'll see to Naler. You hustle and make your men ready for the ride."

"Yes, suh." Vance was breezily self-confident.

Tynsdale handed him a roll of bills and Vance went out, Tynsdale disappearing somewhere in the big house. Hatfield knew he must not linger. He had little time in which to save Ben Naler, for once Tynsdale had the rancher Naler would be done.

He flitted through the shrubbery and beautiful gardens to cross the high fence. Picking up the golden sorrel, he rode back to the center of Houston and straight to the main police station at the city hall.

A police sergeant at the desk glanced up at the grim face of the tall visitor.

"What is it now?" asked the sergeant gruffly.

Hatfield's clothing was torn and stained and while he had cleaned his face as best he could he was scratched and bruised. But the next minute the policeman jumped. He was looking at the silver star on silver circle, emblem of the Texas Rangers. Hatfield shoved credentials across the desk.

"And what can we do for the Rangers?" asked the sergeant, with new respect in his voice.

"Yuh got a prisoner here named Ben Naler. He was picked up at Burke's shack, the one that burned down earlier tonight. Yuh'll have to release him. I'll guarantee him."

"Well now, yuh ought to have a paper for him." The sergeant consulted the book. "He's held on suspicion. We were goin' to turn him loose in the mornin' if nothin' come up against him. Says he's an honest rancher and was set upon by a passel of outlaws."

"That's right. Is the chief of police here? Tell him I want to see him."

"The chief's home between the blankets, Ranger. I booked Naler meself. Let's see." The sergeant scratched his head. "Tell yuh what. I'll let yuh have him if yuh'll guarantee to produce him in the mornin' when court holds."

"*Bueno.*"

CHAPTER XVII

Rush

MINUTES later the bedraggled Naler stood in the anteroom. He shook hands with Hatfield and began to tell him in an excited voice of his experiences. Hatfield cut it short, thanked the sergeant, and led Naler outside.

"We got no time to waste, Ben," he said. "Tynsdale's on the prod. Where's yore hoss?"

"I think the police fetched him here. He may be around back at their racks."

They rounded the brick building and there was Ben Naler's long-legged gelding standing at the hitch-rail. He was still saddled, as he had been brought in after Naler had been arrested. Naler checked the cinches and threw a long leg over the saddle. The Ranger was already mounted and they moved back on the lane at the side of city hall.

"Here comes Palacio!" warned the Ranger. "Keep back, Naler."

They waited in the shadow of the brick wall while Palacio and a small man in a blue coat who looked as though he had just jumped out of bed, went hurrying up the stone steps in front.

"They're after you," said Hatfield. "Aimed to take yuh out and finish yuh. Let's ride!"

Naler trailed him and they made fast time away from there for they could hear the sergeant roaring into the street from the front door, ordering them to come back. Frightened by the developments, the sergeant wanted the prisoner back. Glancing over his shoulder Hatfield saw Palacio, the sergeant, and Tynsdale's attorney shaking their fists after the running pair.

"Where to?" asked Naler.

"We'll pick up our gear on the way out and head for the Yellow Hills. Houston's too hot for us and we got to carry warnin' to Jordan and his friends."

They lost a few minutes as they paused at their furnished room and packed their sacks, picking up their carbines and the belts for them which had been left in the room when they had ridden into the city. Then Hatfield left a bill to pay the rent and they hurried out. Picking up speed, they made for the southwest trail.

Naler was worn to a frazzle and the Ranger needed a rest, but they put several miles between themselves and Houston before they pulled up and turned off the highway. There they hunted a spot where they could sleep a little while. They would make better time if they did not wear out themselves and their horses.

There was a small wooded mound overlooking the road and they made for it, hiding themselves and their mounts in the low growth. . . .

Dawn woke the Ranger. The sun was gilding the eastern sky and he rose and stretched. Ben Naler stirred uneasily in his sleep.

Hatfield felt refreshed. He took a drink of water from his canteen and rolled a quirly, thinking over what he must do. There was no use in applying to the Houston authorities, for Tynsdale had influence and the money to buy clever lawyers who could delay everything. The Ranger could not take such a chance, with the people of the Yellow Hills in danger of death. He must get back there and warn that Tynsdale and Vance were coming.

Through habitual alertness the Ranger scanned the highway stretching for miles in either direction. Houston could be made out to the northeast as the morning breeze dispelled the haze from the bayou. Dust rolled in a large cloud over the road coming from the town and he knew at once that a band of horsemen were coming along the pike toward him.

He brought out his field glasses and focused them. He did not look for long, but with a quick exclamation jumped over to shake Naler awake.

"Get up, Naler! Tynsdale, Vance and about fifty gunhands are comin'!"

Warned by Naler's escape and the police sergeant's story that the tall man was a Texas Ranger, Tynsdale had jumped the gun and started early, aware that he must strike instantly if he wished to triumph!

By the time Goldy and Naler's gelding were saddled, though the enemy party had approached close enough so that the Ranger and his friend could not emerge and reach the road without being recognized.

Hatfield made his decision. "I'd rather

they didn't savvy we're ahead of 'em, Naler. We'll stay hid till they pass. If Tynsdale sights us he may push on even faster than he is now. Keep yore hoss quiet."

THEY were well hidden from the highway. Guns ready, they waited while the bunch neared the wooded mound. In the van were Sidney Tynsdale in his black leather riding rig, the lean Palacio in his black hat and dark clothing, and Blackbeard Vance who had collected the outlaws composing the main company.

Hatfield watched the horsemen go by. Some wore chaps and Stetsons and had the look of being range riders. Others were city outlaws, men in plain shirts and trousers and narrow-brimmed hats. All were heavily armed with pistols, shotguns and carbines. They were strung out behind their leaders for a couple of hundred yards, and Hatfield observed the horseflesh that the majority of them rode.

Glittering eyes swept the horizon and both Vance and Tynsdale stared for a time at the little mound, but there was nothing to draw them off the route. They kept going and the dust roiled under the trotting hoofs. They disappeared over a low rise as the cotton fields began to appear.

"Now they're ahead of us," growled Ben Naler. "What next, Ranger?"

"Tynsdale ain't certain they are ahead, though he hopes we're still back in the city and he's beaten us to the run. We'll pick another route and pass 'em. Most of their hosses can't stand any kind of pace for long—yuh could see that. They'll have to go slower than we can and they'll have to rest their mounts a lot more."

Naler brightened up. "That's so. Well, come on!"

It was a matter of hard riding and a steady push. A few miles in from the highway they found a dirt road which ran through farming plantations toward the Brazos. Warming up their horses, they pushed on at a fast clip. Such swift animals could outdistance the plugs ridden by many of Tynsdale's followers in a long run.

"When yuh reckon they'll hit the Yellow Hills?" asked Naler for the hundredth time, as they pushed up a long slope toward the higher ground bounding the valley of the Colorado.

They had ridden through the long hot day and Hatfield was certain that they were ahead of Tynsdale and his bunch. He had cut back to the main highway after noon and there had been no sign of the ravening killers having passed as yet.

"I figger that Tynsdale will give his men and the hosses a breather once they get into the Yellow Hills country," answered Hatfield. "It's only fifty miles as the crow flies but the roads wind a lot and they'll stop to drink and eat and let their mounts rest. They'll have to. It will be night by the time they get over there and Vance and his gunslingers ain't acquainted with the lay of the land, even if Tynsdale is. I think we'll have a few hours to get ready."

"I hope so," said the worn Naler fervently. "We got to save Jordan and those other folks."

Dust coated both men and horses. They had been wet to the waist after swimming the rivers and creeks on the side route, and mud had plastered them. The sun was bright and merciless.

The sun was setting behind the Yellow Hills when they passed the tiny little settlement of Stuart's Ford. There was no sign of the enemy.

"We make for Jordan's first?" inquired Naler anxiously.

"That's right."

Under the rising moon they kept on until they reached the Jordan horse farm. Lights showed in the house and Naler pressed eagerly forward.

"Watch the sentry," warned Hatfield.

Rob was on guard duty and challenged them. He was delighted to see them when they had identified themselves, and they hurried to the house. Hatfield followed Naler up on the porch. Moss Jordan jumped from his chair to greet them, but Connie ran past her father.

"Ben!"

"Connie!"

SHE stared up into Naler's strained features and then she was in the rancher's arms. Naler kissed her, and Moss Jordan blinked.

"Say, it looks like I'm goin' to lose my daughter," said Jordan.

Hatfield smiled. "Yuh look at it wrong, Moss. Make it yuh've won a fine young feller who will be as good as a son to yuh.

He's got it all planned out for yuh. He's got as much land as you want on his ranch and he'll help yuh move out there across the Pecos so yuh'll be near 'em."

"Well, now, I don't know. I'm sort of set here."

"Please, Dad!" begged Connie softly, clinging to Naler.

"There's no time to pow-wow," said the Ranger. He quickly warned Moss Jordan of the cavalcade of death coming toward them.

Connie brought drinks for them, and hot coffee to wash down a quick bite. Jordan's two men were started out to alarm the people of the hills. Others would fan out from the first places visited and carry the Ranger's word to all.

Now the tall man pinned on his badge, the silver star on silver circle, for the time to put up a fight had arrived.

He had made a tentative plan of campaign which he outlined to Jordan and Naler and they nodded in agreement.

"It's the only way," said Moss Jordan, an old soldier used to planning such affairs. "If they ever get started killin', we won't be able to check it. Ain't got enough fighters for a scrap in the open."

CHAPTER XVIII

Battle

ON THE stroke of midnight most of the Yellow Hills men involved had reached Jordan's and more were on the way. Sam Olliphant was there with an older son and four cowboys. Van Lewis and a brother, Mark Ellsworth, Pop Murphy, Duke Ulman and two hands, Charlie Sutton, and others came with their guns to defend themselves.

The Texas Ranger took command and told them what he intended to do. Aware of his identity now, and sufficiently impressed by his previous exhibitions of fighting power and strength of mind, they were quick to accept his leadership.

"In my opinion they'll come after Jordan first," said the Ranger. "That will fetch 'em along the south river road. I savvy just the spot where the Yellow Hills toe down almost to the water."

For what Hatfield planned they needed picks, shovels and lanterns, and Jordan could supply enough of these tools. The party rode toward Stuart's Ford to the place picked by Hatfield. A mountain spur thrust north and narrowed the valley.

"We'll dig in on that slope," said Hatfield. "Murphy, you and Ulman ride up the road a piece and stand guard. We don't aim to be surprised, though I doubt if Tynsdale comes before dawn."

His guards set, the Ranger directed the entrenching. Moss Jordan knew all about breastworks as did others who had served in the Southern armies. In order to gain protection from enemy fire, they must dig in deep enough to screen a man standing up to shoot. They made five short trench lengths along the slope over the highway, and around the bend the Ranger ordered big rocks rolled down to barricade the road. He also took his turn at digging in.

It was hard work and blistered hands, but there was no let up. Oil lanterns furnished light enough to operate by. Once when the Ranger paused to wipe sweat from his brow he curiously regarded the sides of his trench. These were dull yellow, with brownish and sometimes blackish veins streaked through.

"This is queer lookin' dirt under the topsoil, Jordan," remarked the Ranger.

Moss Jordan stepped over to stare at the uneven sides of the little trench.

"Ain't it?" he said. "But it ain't unusual, Ranger. Yuh'll find that stuff all through here. There's mountains of it. That's what gives the Yellow Hills their name."

Hatfield had been pushed hard in the fight against the ruthless, vicious Sidney Tynsdale, so during his earlier tour in the Yellow Hills he had had no hint of Tynsdale's business. Not until he had visited Houston had he discovered that Tynsdale was a manufacturer of gunpowder and allied chemicals.

Hatfield had studied mining engineering before joining the Rangers, and knew a good deal about such matters. He relinquished his shovel to a cowboy as he rolled a smoke and squatted to think it all over. Suddenly a light burst upon him.

"Now I savvy what Tynsdale's after!" he exclaimed, and set to work again, hard-

er than ever.

When the trenches were deep enough, the Ranger screened them from the road by sticking brush and small trees into the earth in front of them. The ambush was ready.

Waiting was difficult. The armed men of the Yellow Hills rested after their labors, but there was tense anxiety in their hearts. Each man wondered if his own home and people were safe. There was a chance that Tynsdale might have come around and would strike from another direction.

Hatfield snatched forty winks. Before dawn he saddled Goldy and, leaving Moss Jordan in charge at the ambush, he rode toward Stuart's Ford.

The first gray of the new day lightened the sky when he sighted the enemy. With Tynsdale, Vance and Felipe Palacio in the van, the killers were coming!

The Ranger pushed the golden sorrel around the curve and pulled up in full sight of his foes.

Tynsdale saw him first. The chief shouted hoarsely and raised an arm to point out the tall rider who had fought so hard against Tynsdale's overwhelming power. Vance and Palacio and others in the sordid crew also recognized Hatfield.

The new light touched the silver star within the silver circle. Tynsdale knew then that he was a Texas Ranger and for that reason the powder manufacturer had to kill him. Tynsdale dared not leave such an enemy alive to balk his plans.

HATFIELD feigned surprise at sight of the great band of killers. He uttered a Rebel yell and whipped up a Colt to fire at them. A man clapped a hand to his arm and Vance and his men surged forward, shooting as they came.

The sorrel took Hatfield out ahead, out of easy pistol range. They were baying like fierce dogs on a blood trail and the speed picked up until they were strung out and rushing along at full tilt. Hatfield did not want them to miss the ambush, so meant to lead them to it.

The faster they came, led on by the Ranger, the better for Moss Jordan and his hidden forces. As Hatfield had believed they must, Tynsdale's party had stopped to rest themselves and their mounts, to eat and drink before starting their attack on Jordan's. They had gone on the old theory that the first touch of dawn was always the best time to strike, before people were up, and yet with enough light to see details.

Such a force as Tynsdale had brought along could easily overwhelm single victims. A determined rush on a house would carry the howling, killing gunslingers through to the building, and the thin defense any one family could offer would mean little.

Sidney Tynsdale, in his leather outfit and Stetson, had his reversed bandanna bunched at his bearded chin. The manufacturer dropped back in the eager crush of riders pushing on the Ranger's trail. Palacio stayed close to his master. Blackbeard Vance whooped it up savagely, egging on his men.

The morning light was up when they swerved on the road to skirt the hulking mountain spur hemming in the valley. On the right toward the river was a rocky slope, uneven for fast riding.

Hatfield glanced up. Jordan had his riflemen hidden in the screened trenches. The toe of the hill cut off the barricade from the direction in which the enemy were coming. The Ranger made the turn, leaped from his saddle and scampered up the sliding bank toward his friends.

"Go on, run off, Goldy!" he cried.

The trained sorrel swerved, picking his way down the hill toward the brush screen where the river bank dropped to the stream. He moved fast and bullets sent after him missed him. Soon the gelding was safe among the trees.

The howling, angry gunhands, however, were intent on the man rather than his horse. They came around the turn at full speed as the Ranger, panting for breath, jumped into a trench and shouted:

"Open up, boys! Let 'em have it."

Jordan's men fired. It was a deadly, withering volley cutting the enemy flank. Vance's killers turned in their leather seats. All they could do was to send ineffectual pistol shots back at the screened trenches. But only bobbing Stetsons and faces showed at which to aim.

Behind the first riders the main gang piled up, horses rearing, and shrieking in alarm, jogging against the mounts in front. Blackbeard Vance was bellowing frantic commands as he tried to break up

the growing melee. Confused by the sudden, smashing blow, the bunch from Houston looked for escape.

Lead plugged into mustang ribs and into human flesh, cutting Vance's fighters. Some sought to get away by speed, but the barricade of boulders ahead blocked the road. They swerved down the uneven slope and pelted toward the river. But horses went down on the treacherous stretch and then half a dozen marksmen, posted at the drop of the river bank, opened fire.

Churning in the narrow space, the gunslingers sought to turn and ride back the way they had come.

"Ambush! Ambush!" screamed a high-pitched voice over and over.

Men fell in the crush, cut by the flying hoofs of their own horses. Vance's efforts to rally them and regain fighting order were lost in the shuffle. With such fellows, when so pressed, it became every man for himself. They were in it for profit, money and possible loot. Determined resistance and a loss of the odds would break such a force.

The Houston men were beginning to slug and shoot at one another as they found themselves blocked in the surging mess. Blind fury possessed them, as they sought to run away and could not because their companions were in the way.

A few lucky ones managed to skirt between the barricade and the river and by spurring their mustangs in a mad dash, reached the road beyond. But these made no attempt to help their trapped comrades. They galloped on as fast as they could go, hunting for escape. Others at the extreme rear were able to swing and retreat.

AROUND Blackbeard Vance rallied a few more determined rascals. Vance was shooting back at the heads he saw. His beard bristled and his eyes flamed with red hate.

"They'll give up if Vance falls!" thought the Ranger.

He was down the line but he rose up and took careful aim, aware that Vance saw him and was turning his gun on the tall officer. The silver star within the circle glinted in the morning light as Hatfield's thumb rose from the hammer and the big pistol spoke.

Flame flashed from Vance's gun and Hatfield heard the bullet whiz past his ear. Vance threw up his arms and stood up high in his saddle. His eyes seemed as wide as saucers for an instant, then he collapsed. The dancing stallion under him threw off the heavy body as Vance's legs relaxed their grip. The killer slid to the road. Mustangs immediately closed about him and Vance was no longer in sight.

Wild slugs missed the Ranger as he ducked down, and then came up again to peek over the trench bulge. The opposition was dying. It was only spasmodic now with no direction. The big Ranger jumped out of the trench and ran along the steep slope.

"Surrender!" he bawled, his stentorian voice ringing over the clang of the battle. "Surrender in the name of Texas! Throw down, outlaws!"

The quailing gunslingers saw Jim Hatfield in all his magnificent fighting trim. They were already beaten by the Ranger strategy and tactics. Many threw in their guns and raised their hands high so they would not be killed by the marksmen inside the trenches.

As the stronger found themselves deserted by their comrades they, too, lost heart. Colts and carbines were dropped and hands raised. The Houston outlaws begged for mercy, pleading for life. It was better to chance a prison sentence than to die under those biting rifles.

The fight ended quickly as the killers surrendered.

"Come on, tie 'em up," Jim Hatfield called. "There's plenty of prisoners for yuh, gents."

Moss Jordan and the men of the Yellow Hills came swarming out of the trenches. The high-pitched Rebel yell rang out as they slid down to the road, and while some covered the captives, others secured their hands and pulled them off their horses. They were lined up against the wall of the bluff and held by menacing, scowling marksmen.

But Sidney Tynsdale was not among the sullen company they had roped in. Blackbeard Vance was dead, shot by a Ranger bullet and crushed under the sharp hoofs of his own horses.

"I'll have to get Tynsdale or it's no go," muttered the Ranger.

He was weary and cut up by the hard scrap. He had lost sight of Tynsdale in the

heat of the fight and the manufacturer had been hidden from him by the bulging spur.

"Tynsdale must have been able to turn and ride back," Hatfield said to Miss Jordan. "He's the real cause of yore troubles. If we let him go he'll be back with a worse bunch."

Palacio, too, was gone. The dark skinned Spaniard was never far from Tynsdale and they had stayed well to the rear when the shooting and pursuit of the Ranger had begun. The crafty Tynsdale had got away.

The tall officer whistled up the golden sorrel. Goldy came up the slope, climbing toward the road. Ben Naler, who had fought bravely through the battle, was helping Moss Jordan, for the Yellow Hills contingent was small to guard the large number of prisoners. The desperadoes would be watching for a chance to bolt, when they regained their breath and nerve.

"I'll go after Tynsdale myself," decided Hatfield.

Mounting the golden sorrel he started on Sidney Tynsdale's trail.

CHAPTER XIX

Paid Up

SIDNEY TYNSDALE must pay for what he had done! That thought was in the Ranger's mind as he rode at a fast clip on his mission. It was still with him when he entered the little settlement of Stuart's Ford. He did not mean for Tynsdale to get back to Houston where the manufacturer had many friends and cronies, a battery of expensive lawyers to shield him from the law.

In a glance the tall officer could sweep the main street of the town. In the bright morning sunshine Stuart's Ford was as lively as it ever was, with a few housewives out marketing and children playing in the meadows. Dogs, pigs and chickens were in the back yards. The constable was dozing in front of the little lockup down the plaza. Several saddle horses and a couple of teams stood at the racks.

The grim Ranger, marked by battle and the hard chase he had made, rode straight down the center of the road, glancing right and left. The gray-green eyes had a dark coldness in them now and his loaded Colts rode ready at his hips. The golden sorrel stepped high with the pride of his calling.

In front of the livery stable stood two lathered, spur-gouged mustangs with blood running down their flanks. They were heaving, and had been run almost to death. A wrangler was taking the saddle off one and transferring it to the back of a fresh black, while a chesnut gelding already wore the second hull which had been cinched tight.

Sidney Tynsdale emerged from the Palace bar and at once he saw the big officer coming. Tynsdale gave a sharp cry. He whipped a pistol from his holster and fired twice. One bullet came within a foot of the moving Ranger's ear.

Tynsdale jumped back as Hatfield pulled a Colt and took aim. Hatfield shifted his hand and the big revolver boomed. Tynsdale leaped, turned, and Palacio ran from the saloon and threw himself between his master and the Ranger as Hatfield let go once more. Palacio had a gun up and was taking careful aim.

Palacio caught the Ranger's bullet and folded up in the middle. As he went down, Tynsdale made the door of the bar and disappeared inside.

Hatfield jumped to the road and ran toward the Palace, gun in hand. He ducked under the rail and went up on the low veranda of the saloon. He paused, seeing Tynsdale running for the back.

"Halt, Tynsdale!" he shouted. His stentorian voice echoed in the empty barroom.

Tynsdale glanced back. He had his gun out and in desperation he raised it and fired. The slug cut a long splinter from the frame of the front door and the Ranger was slashed by a flying sliver of wood. A woman screamed in the hotel annex and the proprietor, who had been cleaning up, ducked behind the bar.

Hatfield rushed in. "Surrender!" he shouted, giving Tynsdale another chance to submit to arrest.

Tynsdale had almost reached the back way out. His eyes glinted with his hate of the Ranger who had run him to earth. The blunt manufacturer turned and slid to a halt. He was crouched, and his teeth

were bared in a snarl.

Hatfield kept coming at him.

"*Mort!* Death to the Rangers!" shrieked Tynsdale.

He had a close target and the big Ranger came steadily on. Tynsdale threw up his pistol. Blood suffused his bearded cheeks. His eyes were as round as saucers as he fired.

The Ranger moved with the speed of trained precision. Seeing that Tynsdale meant to kill, would not give in, Hatfield shot a breath ahead of his enemy.

He heard the near miss of his foe's bullet. But Tynsdale was already staggering. Blood showed on the spade beard and Tynsdale dropped his revolver and raised a small, jeweled hand to his throat. Then he half-turned and fell in the sawdust. . . .

LATE that afternoon, Jim Hatfield addressed the men of the Yellow Hills as they gathered at Moss Jordan's farm to talk over the battle. Connie had served food and drink and the pretty girl stood with Ben Naler's protective arm around her as they listened to the Ranger.

"Yuh have all wondered what it was that caused Sidney Tynsdale to strike yuh," Hatfield said. "It was Tynsdale who sicked Dowie Burke on yuh and gave Burke that list of death with yore names on it. Burke was to kill all on that list. Yuh owned the Yellow Hills and Tynsdale wanted the land. He knew he could pick up the properties for a song, if not for nothin', by destroyin' the owners.

"I didn't find out till last night what Tynsdale wanted. When I located him in Houston I learned he was a gunpowder manufacturer. He owned a big business there and was makin' plenty of money, but aimed to expand. Gunpowder's composed of saltpetre, which is potassium nitrate, of charcoal, and of sulphur.

"The sulphur is hard to get right now and Tynsdale figgered on makin' hisself sort of a sulphur king. These Yellow Hills are actually mountains of sulphur, and that's what Tynsdale wanted.

"He learned of it and checked up, found it was so. He kept it quiet and tried to take yore homes. There was a big fortune and world power in it for Tynsdale and he wasn't the sort who would worry over gettin' rid of a few folks."

A murmur rose from the company.

"This here sulphur is worth big money?" asked Moss Jordan.

"Yes, suh," declared the Ranger. "It's used not only for gunpowder but in makin' matches, fireworks, medicines and bleachin' compounds. I've talked with most of yuh, as yuh savvy, and from what yuh say the deposits underlie the entire Yellow Hills. There must be enough to supply the whole United States, mebbe the world. Mountains of it, I tell yuh."

"We're rich, then!" cried Duke Ulman, usually silent, but awakened to speech by the Ranger's information.

"That's right." Hatfield nodded. "Yuh can sell out for plenty." He circled to Moss Jordan. "Jordan, they'll be diggin' here steady for years, I figger," he said. "Air will be full of sulphur dust and all. It ain't goin' to be a good place to raise horses."

"No, it ain't," agreed Jordan.

Connie and Naler were watching closely.

"I know a mighty good place yuh could move to," Hatfield drawled on. "Across the Pecos, where Ben Naler has a ranch. He'll give yuh as much land as yuh can use."

"I shore will, Mr. Jordan!" cried Naler.

"Please, Dad!" begged Connie.

Moss Jordan's face was wreathed in smiles. "Of course. I aimed to anyways. I'll go."

"This is as good a time as any to tell yore neighbors that Connie's marryin' Ben Naler, ain't it?" asked the Ranger softly.

The girl flushed rosily as Naler held her hand and Moss Jordan blessed them.

IN AUSTIN headquarters Captain Bill McDowell heard the Ranger's report on the trouble in the Yellow Hills.

"Yuh don't look like Cupid much," said McDowell critically. "Still yuh brought off the trick. Yuh're rugged, and that's what it took to settle Tynsdale's hash. Good work, Ranger."

Hatfield took quiet satisfaction in McDowell's approbation. The old captain did not say too much but he said enough to indicate his high opinion of the tall officer.

There was always new business at Ranger headquarters. Complaints flowed in

from every point of the compass, from the thorn jungles of the southeast, from the sultry Gulf Coast, from the forests along the Red River, from the fabulous Panhandle and the Trans-Pecos, the Rio Grande and the tremendous heartland.

Always there were new rascals bobbing up to challenge the law, too tough for local authorities to handle or based where there was no sheriff. Then the Rangers must ride.

McDowell rattled a sheaf of reports. It was a new problem and as usual with the hard ones he had to deal with it meant danger of death to the investigating officer. Hatfield listened to the new complaint. Outlaws were operating along the Red River and good men were being shot up and put upon.

Happiest when on the trail, Jim Hatfield made ready. Soon the old captain stood in the sunshine outside his office, again, waving farewell to his star operative as the Ranger on the golden sorrel moved off to carry the law to the Lone Star empire.

Jim Hatfield delves into the past to unearth the roots of a mysterious range conspiracy that brings death's chill breath to the ranchers of the Staked Plain

IN

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STRAIGHT POKER MAN

By GLADWELL RICHARDSON

Cam Stevens preferred an honest flush on a gaming table to the fourflushers who were trying to ruin La Playeta!

AS FAR as the eye could see, the fiery cauldron of the sky was blue. It ought to be red, Cam Stevens thought, the day was so hot. He'd come up to La Playeta from the south, the last fifty miles through the scorching bareness of the San Simon desert. Both Cam and his horse were worn out by the heat and the dust.

Except for the weathered signs over them, the yellow adobes along the main street looked alike. The appearance of La Playeta, almost lifeless in the heat of the afternoon, disclaimed its importance. But

With the speed of lightning Cam struck for the gun arm

It was a cross-roads from mountains to desert; from mines to stock raising ranges. It constituted an oasis on intersecting trails that came from all directions. Sam Catron's friend in Phoenix had explained this when he made the deal for Cam to come out and take over Sam's poker table.

Cam's eyes traveling up the wheel-cut main street picked out the sign over Catron's Ox Yoke Saloon. His gaze went beyond to rest on a long board over the top of a flat roof in the next block on the east side. It read "DuBois & Son, General Mercantile." He'd heard some time ago the family was here.

A stage coach rolled past him. Horses were scattered on both sides of the street. There were few wagons or buckboards.

Reaching the side street next to the Ox Yoke Saloon on the corner, Cam reined the big blue roan to the left. Fifty feet behind the saloon a small adobe shed stood in a fenced lot. The gate sagged open, and Cam rode in. He dismounted before the shed and led his horse inside. His saddle went onto a projecting short pole. He turned the roan into a stall.

HE CAME out, closed the bar to the stall and stood a moment slapping trail dust from his blue broadcloth trousers and the lighter colored shirt. Cam was six feet tall and broad shouldered. His business required good dress at all times. He hitched his sagging gun belt and stepped out intending to go hunt up Sam Catron.

A tall, weathered man showed up inside the gate space. At the same moment a gun was jammed into Cam's left side and he came to a faltering stop. Cam surveyed the tall man curiously and saw that he was a cowman. A walnut-handled gun was thonged low on his right leg.

"This the gun slinger come to join Catron and Goldie Wiltrout's crowd, ain't he, Frank?" the man with the drop asked. He had a way of wheezing his words with each breath.

Cam remained motionless, his hands in front of his body, while the gray eyes of the man called Frank considered him.

"Yuh're Cam Stevens?" he asked softly.

The delay bothered the other man. He said, "Lift yore paws," and jabbed the muzzle of his gun harder against Cam.

That was his mistake. He worked a sucker play like that, being in the worst spot possible. Cam brought his arms to his sides as though to raise his hands. His elbows started folding. Then with the speed of lightning his left hand struck for the gun arm and knocked it harmlessly aside.

With the same motion Cam was lucky enough to get hold of the gun. The idea of hurling the gunslick to the ground died as Cam changed his mind, brought the little man around in front of him for protection. He jerked the gun free with effortless ease and slammed it glancingly against the surprised one's head. He stood there holding the slack body and eyeing the cowman who had paused with his six-gun half out of leather.

"That was a fool trick Bohle fell for," the cowman said tiredly. "Seems like folks was right when they said Catron and Wiltrout was importing a hard case."

"I don't know what yuh're talking about," Cam replied.

"Of course yuh don't." His voice was heavy with sarcasm. "You wouldn't know about the election Sunday morning, for sheriff. Up to now me and the Wiltrout crowd been running even. I see by yore coming it's going to be uneven. Until we take steps to get rid of yuh."

Bohle stirred, whereupon Cam dropped the gun into the little man's holster and shoved him out toward the cowman. Bohle stumbled, straightened and reached up with a groan to feel of his head.

"Don't think we'll always be as easy to handle as this," the cowman warned as he turned and walked away with the disgruntled Bohle. They did not glance back as they went through the side street.

Mystified, yet realizing this man meant business, Cam strolled clear of the adobe himself. He reached the back door of the saloon and entered.

The long barn-like room seemed unusually cool. A thick mud roof kept the heat of the sun out. A partitioned-off north corner had "Office" painted across the door. There was no one in it. Cam went up through the assortment of small tables, a dice layout and a roulette wheel to the bar in front. Hardly a dozen customers were in the place. This was a nocturnal town where people collected after the cool of nightfall.

A disillusioned bartender rested lazily on the other side of the mahogany top. When Cam asked for Catron he stood upright, considering him with awakened interest. Cam ordered a bottle of soda but found it tepid stuff.

"You the new poker table man?" the bartender asked.

"Yes. What happened to the last one?"

"Him? Yuh seen that fenced boothill on the way into town?"

"There, huh." Cam's dark eyes narrowed. "Was he here long?"

"Couple of months. Maybe three." The bartender shrugged indifferently.

"The poker dealer before him—in the same place, I suppose?"

The eyes of the two men met. Cam took another drink of the warm soda. Apparently gamblers were a quick turn-over in La Playeta. A rough, tough town. He'd heard that before.

"Here's Sam now," said the bartender moving away.

Catron walked up slowly, appraising Cam. He was a rotund, pink-faced man of uncertain age. His eyes were frosty, never lighting up or showing feeling. He wore a gray cambray shirt tucked into the striped trousers of a business suit.

They shook hands. Catron asked about Cam's trip from Phoenix, made a few remarks concerning La Playeta and inquired if he would be ready to begin work that night.

"I reckon so," Cam returned. "I'm expected to run the poker table only?" He made the question casual, though behind it roved a definite inquiry if more would be expected of him.

Catron came near expressing annoyance. "On a percentage basis according to my offer. Yuh got anything else in mind?"

"No," Cam said, shaking his head. He told tersely of being jumped at the place where he had put his horse away. Still nothing showed on the saloon man's face.

"That would be Frank Turner. He heads the cowman's ticket for sheriff," Catron told him. "Well, go see Donna Montez out back. She knows yuh're coming and saved a room for you."

Catron strolled away as unconcernedly as he had appeared. Cam got his saddle bags and went along the rough plank porch until he found the kitchen. Donna Montez proved to be a short fat Mexican, her face wrinkled good naturedly with the simple joy of living. She showed Cam the end room next to the salon. When she departed he washed up with water from a pitcher on the stand and lay down on the narrow hard bed to rest awhile.

DUSK was at hand when Cam walked north behind the row of adobes to the next side street. This brought him out on the main thoroughfare, and he saw that riders had come into town meanwhile. Cam crossed to the other side and entered the DuBois store. A gray-haired man of fifty met him at the door and squinted at him in the gloom. Roland DuBois had been about to close up for the night. When he recognized Cam, the harried look on his wrinkled face deepened into downright worry and displeasure.

"Hello, Cam," he said. "Your mother's in back. Go on in."

Cam waited until DuBois had fastened the double doors with bars. The store was large, with overflowing shelves. Obviously the mercantile business here was good. DuBois made stilted conversation. Cam accompanied him through a break in the corner of the counter to the left and into a spacious living room. Sounds echoed from the kitchen, and a moment later a motherly woman of ample build came in. She stopped still a moment before rushing forward. Her arms were tight around Cam's shoulders as she kissed him.

"We heard you'd be coming, Cam," she said. In the lamplight the momentary joy in her face went out, replaced by a cloud of doubt.

"Took a job at the Ox Yoke Saloon," he offered.

"Come in for supper," his mother invited.

He followed her, taking off his hat. The people in the kitchen startled him at first. But not Oscar, his half-brother, whose acid face showed no pleasure at all.

Cam said, "Howdy, Oscar," while he observed the girl standing across the table beside a baby's highchair. In it was a curly-headed boy of around eighteen months. The girl in the checked gingham dress looked young to be a wife and a mother.

"This is Lee, Oscar's wife, Cam," his mother said.

Cam grinned and bowed his head slightly. The girl was staring at him beyond all politeness. Her face had lost color, and since his entrance a strange constraint kept her silent.

His mother eased the embarrassing tension by chatting while she put food on the table and set a place for Cam. He was perfectly at ease himself, and somewhat amused inwardly.

It had been almost five years since he'd come up with the DuBois family. Oscar hadn't been married then. This girl must be from around La Playeta. As he sat down with them to eat Cam listened politely to his mother's over-anxious talk, yet his mind was back there in the past. He didn't feel resentment toward Roland DuBois as he once had. The vinegar was out of him, replaced by a sort of good-natured tolerance.

When Cam was five his father died. Two years later his mother married Roland DuBois. They'd all gotten along fairly well until Oscar came. From then on there'd been little time for Cam. Even as young as he was the handwriting on the wall was discernible. DuBois had never been able to meet his stepson on any level. Naturally, as Cam could understand now, his love went to his own son, the small, rather sickly Oscar. So at fifteen Cam merely drifted away from home. Two years later he found them in Phoenix where DuBois ran a grocery store.

Cam's mother, overwhelmed at getting him back, tried her utmost to smooth over the ill feeling in the family and she tried hard. Cam gave her that credit. Yet the wanderlust was in his blood. So perhaps he simply took the excuse of a kid argument with Oscar, in which DuBois took sides, to go off again. From that period on he seldom saw his mother.

After a while Cam asked about the store. That being a subject dear to the whole family the situation grew less stilted immediately. Business in La Playeta boomed. The town would become the seat of the new county. To the north coursed a river that would some day be damned. Not this year or next, but within a decade surely. It would bring wealth and population to the surrounding dry desert.

"I hear yuh're even going to have a sheriff's election come Sunday," Cam drawled at the end of the meal.

That brought the uneasiness back into the room like a wave of ice-laden air from the arctic. Into the sudden silence Oscar blurted, "As if yuh didn't already know about it!" The bitterness and resentment in his voice startled Cam.

His father spoke reprovingly, "Oscar." The younger man fell into a sulky mood. Cam discovered his mother's eyes on him, in their depths that feather shadow of worry again.

"Frank Turner, a cowman, heads the choice of all the decent people," she said slowly. "The issue is clearly defined and has brought on a hot fight between the Turner faction and the group headed by Wiltrout. He is backed by the saloon crowd and those who would exploit La Playeta."

"In other words, this Wiltrout would run his office to suit the crooked element?" Cam asked quietly.

"You have it about right," she replied. "Wiltrout is a notorious gun marshal who has drifted from one frontier town to another. Always running the law to suit crooks."

"If it comes to a fight, Wiltrout stands ready to back up his rule with guns?"

"Murder, if necessary, Cam."

"Oh, well," he arose from the table after noticing the time, "this doesn't concern me. Except Frank Turner jumped me already. I don't like his strong-arm methods either."

"I think it does concern you," his mother told him in an odd voice. "You're working for Sam Catron."

"What's he got to do with it? Is he a Wiltrout backer?"

"Wouldn't he be, owning the largest saloon in town? With a sheriff like Wiltrout, he could operate as he pleases."

Cam departed, thinking over her words. Even his mother had actually been disconcerted over his coming. Cam was a well-known figure, both as a gambler who played straight and as a fighter. From this must have spread considerable rumor. But, Cam shrugged his shoulders, the DuBois family had nothing to do with him one way or the other. He would certainly leave them alone and he thought he had a right to work here if he desired.

WHEN he entered the Ox Yoke Saloon four men sat at the poker table. Cam took the chair against the wall, and a house man brought the bank along with a new deck of cards. Cam considered the man on his right and found that individual equally interested in him. He was dressed in dark clothes and had long wavy yellow hair hanging over the back of his brown leather jacket. He wore two guns strapped to his legs. This would be "Goldie" Wiltrout with the disconcerting habit of staring with unwinking gaze from close-set, small black eyes.

Before Cam could deal the first hand a fifth man placed a chair directly across the round topped table from him. It was Frank Turner. He bought into the game, picked up cards without a word.

Cam played more or less abstractedly. The first few rounds would be in the nature of feeling out the game. When the deck came to Turner, he tossed it lightly into the center of the table.

"I think we ought to have a new deck," he said flatly.

Cam went cold.

"Trying to go on with yore attempted bushwhack of this afternon?" he drawled in a level voice. "Any time yuh want to mix with me all you need to do is fill your hand."

Turner's eyes narrowed on him as he came up slowly from his chair. A funny expression crossed his face.

"Cash in yore chips," Cam told him. "Yuh're quitting this game and yuh don't come back in until yuh can behave yourself. I know yore play. It's to yell an accusation so as to start a fight. All it will get yuh with me will be six foot of ground in boothill. Any game I run will be straight poker. Savvy?"

Using his left hand, Cam counted Turner's chips and paid. The cowman, looking bloody murder, left the table. He did not leave the scene, however, but paused a few steps away to watch the game.

"Just to keep down any argument we will have a new deck," Cam said. It was brought, seal intact, and was broken and shuffled by Wiltrout. Only Cam's left hand remained in sight on the table. His fingers moved slightly and he seemed to be occupied in staring at the center of the green baize cloth.

He passed; no one opened until Wiltrout shoved in a few chips. He discarded first, three cards that landed under the bottom of the pile. Cam moved the rejects over to one side. He took two cards as Wiltrout dealt around. Taking a glance at his hand, Wiltrout shoved in a stack of blues and leaned back in his chair with a smug grin.

Cam hesitated over calling until all the players looked at him patiently. What happened then was a stunning surprise. Cam's right hand snaked up with a gun muzzle pointed at Wiltrout. The bland face froze.

"Drop yore cards and stand up," Cam ordered.

Caught off guard, Wiltrout slowly laid down his cards and stood up, his emotions a mixture of consternation and rising anger.

There was silence about the table. Then Cam told a bystander to pick up Wiltrout's guns. At that the man broke into a flow of abuse. Cam stopped him with a sharp warning.

He said to the other players, "The lowest three cards in the discard were put there by Wiltrout. Somebody examine them." Eager hands reached over. A gasp escaped the man who made the discovery. Cam nodded without the trace of a smile. "Now look at his held cards."

When that was done the players waited in their chairs. Cam did not remove his eyes from the enraged Wiltrout. He could have a hidden gun.

"Marked by slipping a sharpened finger nail between the paper on the edge near the upper corner, huh?" he drawled and heard sounds of confirmation. "That's a right nice stunt on aces and jacks. If yuh know how to do it without getting caught. Look through all the other cards for the same marks."

There were none. Which Cam expected. Only Wiltrout had handled the new deck of cards to any extent.

"Don't ever try to sit in one of my games again," Cam warned him coldly.

"Why you blasted tinhorn!" Wiltrout burst out, his face working with hatred.

"Give him back his guns," Cam said to the bystander who held them. He holstered his own weapon and rose to his feet.

Wiltrout opened his mouth but closed

it without saying anything. With a flourish he turned around, took a gun in each hand and slapped them into holsters. Angrily he strode through the spectators towards Catron's office. Wiltrout wouldn't fight yet. As Cam glanced around he met Turner's cynically amused grin of derision.

The game went on. The empty chairs were taken by other men. Cam raked in a few pots for the house. All the while he maintained a watch for Wiltrout's return. The angry man had gone for Catron. Finally they came out of the office together. Wiltrout was talking a blue streak, but seemed to be getting nowhere, to judge from Catron's placid expression. Once or twice the saloon man did nod his head. The pair came up to within ten feet of Cam.

"Give the game to a house man will yuh, Stevens?" Catron said. "I want to talk to yuh in the office."

Cam lifted his head and looked Catron in the eye. "If you're going to tell me I've got to stand for ribbing a straight poker game like Wiltrout's wants to, say it here where everybody can hear. I'm playing poker straight or not at all."

Wiltrout's eyes blazed pure hatred. He turned away from Catron, walking towards the bar. Turner was no longer among the watching spectators. Catron smiled for once.

"I hired yuh to run my poker table square," he declared clearly. "That's the way I want all my games conducted. It's something else I want to talk to yuh about."

"Okay."

Finishing out the hand, Cam left the table in charge of a house employee and walked to the office. Catron was waiting inside, his emotionless eyes going to Cam searchingly as he poured whisky into glasses. Cam took one neat and waited suspiciously.

"Turner fell onto yuh first off," Catron said. "Goldie is after yore hide for catching him cheating. Both them people and their following mean to kill yuh if they can. Stevens, looks to me like yuh'd be smart to ramble on."

"If that's all that's worrying yuh, I'm still running the poker table until you tell me different," Cam replied firmly.

"I admire yore courage but I think yuh're a fool," Catron snapped back.

"Is that all?" Cam turned through the door, taking two long steps before he became aware that the three men crowding through the back door were after him.

THE light was dim back there, but at the flurry of movement Cam's gun came up with a roar. At the same time smoke wagons near the back door spewed lead around him into the wooden walls. A man screamed in pain and then the bushwhack, never fully set, dissolved as men plunged out into the night. When Cam got to the door it was to hear men running away. One of them cursed and sobbed alternately, but he was still able to run.

Cam started back, replacing spent cartridges with new. Catron appeared in the doorway of his office, holding a double-barreled shot gun.

"Yuh kinda get the idea?" he said, and retreated.

The noise resumed inside the saloon. Seemingly unconcerned Cam took over the poker table again. The excitement appeared to be over for the night. At daybreak the game closed. Cam went to care for his horse before moseying into Donna Montez's kitchen for a breakfast of eggs and thick steak. He walked sleepily to his room and lay down. His eyes closed.

Almost instantly he snapped wide awake, clawing automatically at his gun. As abruptly his alertness subsided. The person in the room was Lee DuBois. Cam studied her in the light of the window. She looked desperate and determined.

"I had to talk to you," she began haltingly, watching him intently. "You're upsetting everything. The happiness and the progress we've enjoyed here so far."

A cynical twist marked Cam's mouth. He felt sorry for her, but he wasn't to blame for any situation the DuBois family might be in.

"I see what yuh're driving at," he answered. "Yuh've listened to the family blame everything and anything on me. Especially Oscar. No matter how they fare, if it's bad, I'm the cause."

She looked tired and defeated.

"I see it's no use to talk to you."

"For heaven's sake, what about?" he demanded, genuinely puzzled. "I've al-

ways played the game straight, so how could my coming here affect the DuBois family in any way?"

She walked past him to the door, a sob in her throat. Her emotion was under control when she turned.

"I'm trying hard not to hate you," she spoke clearly. "It may be possible you don't see your arrival has given the Wiltrout crowd a heavy hand in this fight against law and order. This could be a decent town, but that's beside the point. So far the DuBois family has been neutral, taking no sides in the election scrap, though our sympathies can only be one way. Now you arrive and we're in difficulties."

"Because of me? Sheer nonsense!"

"Yes? No matter how you may hate us all you're kin. You've thrown in with Catron and Wiltrout. So, it means folks have decided we're on that side too. Now we might as well move somewhere else because we'll lose every self-respecting customer .we have at the store. Ruin—just when the future seemed bright."

She did leave then, sobbing as she hurried out. Cam could hear her run off the porch. He stood puzzled for a long time before retiring to the hard bed. He tried to sleep, but didn't do much of it. Late in the afternoon he ate again and at dark went to the poker table.

It wasn't what Lee DuBois had said so much as the real reason for her coming to see him. He could understand now that it had been a final effort to stave off serious trouble. That bothered Cam because never before had it occurred to him that what he did might harm others. Now he knew the rumors specifically claimed he'd been brought in to sway gun power toward the election of Wiltrout as sheriff.

People said he was an honest gambler —but a fighter as well. His reputation alone would swing support to the side he might favor. Since he was a gunfighter, it followed that he would be on hand to take part in any fight that developed. All of which Cam thought decidedly unfair since he was not personally interested in the election one way or the other. But of course nobody was going to believe that. Catron's position puzzled him. Was the saloon man simply riding the fence?

The night proved to be one of growing tensity in the town. Wiltrout did not show up. Nor did a single cowman or cowboy appear in the Ox Yoke. The next day was Sunday, and the ballot box was to be open at the one-room schoolhouse at eight.

Cam closed his game at dawn. Business hadn't been so good since the two factions were out rounding up their cohorts. As soon as Cam had wolfed down breakfast he went north up the street toward the store. People were pouring into town for the voting. He came down to the side of the DuBois store and entered the kitchen.

His mother was working over an ironing board. She placed the sad iron on the stove and faced him.

"Yuh didn't want me to come to La Playeta, did yuh?" he asked.

"Why did you?"

"Because of the good deal offered me. I'd some vague idea I might like to settle down here."

She drew a deep breath.

"Cam, you're my first-born. When we first heard you were coming I'd some silly notion like that myself. I'd hoped it was true. Until Wiltrout spread the story you'd thrown in with Catron."

"I fail to see how I could affect this election even if it was true I was on one side or the other. Which I'm not."

"Cam, it's your reputation. You're a leader, looked up to. People who never laid eyes on Cam Stevens will tell you what a scrapper and a square shooter he is. You're a man of stature, though you may not realize it. You could swing this election to the side of law and order if you wanted to."

"Me?" He laughed brittlely. "Frankly, I don't favor either of them for sheriff. I've had run-ins with both." He turned out through the door. She followed him.

"Cam, what are you going to do?"

"I don't know. I'll make up my mind on the way back to the Ox Yoke."

WHEN Cam cut into the main street, he saw a large group of cowboys and cowmen dismounting at the upper end. They were men of grim countenance, and armed heavily. On the other side, when he turned south, Cam ran into Turner and two other cowmen.

"Yuh brought along plenty of help to bushwhack me this time, I see," he drawled.

"Yuh don't like yourself much, do

yuh?" retorted the cowman. "What we're going to do is see Wiltrout don't take over this election by force like he aims to do. He's down there in the Ox Yoke now with all the scum and riff-raff he could call in."

"Cussing Wiltrout? You jumped me twice now, Turner."

"Yeah. The first time we only aimed to talk to yuh. On the second some of the boys decided to pay yuh back for the roughing yuh gave Bohle."

"You talk best with a gun at a man's back?" Cam observed dryly.

Turner flushed. "You win," he retorted tersely. "Until that night we didn't know but what it was best to talk to yore kind over gun sights."

"What changed yore mind?"

"When yuh jumped Wiltrout for cheating. It proved yore reputation for being an honest gambler."

Cam's mirthless laugh echoed behind him as he walked on to the Ox Yoke. There he paused, noticing that Turner and his two friends were following a short distance behind him. As Cam hesitated, Wiltrout's rasping voice drifted out around the slatted bat-wings of the saloon.

"You boys won't prevent nobody from actually voting. All yuh'll do is hang around to see Turner's crowd don't take over. Every so often yuh'll put in some of them marked ballots yuh got."

"What'll happen when the count is made," a voice asked lazily, "and it turns out ten times as many people voted as lives in these parts?"

"We'll do the counting," Wiltrout retorted. "If one is necessary by then. I figure one certain candidate is going to be eliminated permanently."

Cam still hesitated, undecided. Turner would probably make a fair sheriff. The gun marshal, Wiltrout, however, was the type who preyed upon people of the frontier just as he'd sought to mark certain cards for his own gain the other night. When Wiltrout's gang went to the schoolhouse, so would Turner's supporters. A blood bath of the town was inevitable.

Cam made his decision. He went in quietly through the bat-wings. Wiltrout was addressing a motley bunch of hardened characters to whom he'd already issued rifles and shotguns. Wiltrout broke off when he saw Cam at the side of the bar. Catron was there, as placid as ever.

"Yuh've got a mighty poor sense of what's right and wrong, Wiltrout," Cam said. "And I don't like the rumor yuh spread that I'm with yuh. I'm not."

Wiltrout's thick lips twisted in a sneer.

"I thought we'd have some trouble with yuh, Stevens," he retorted. "Boys," to the packed men below him, "stand aside. I'll take care of this waddy!"

Wiltrout did not take his eyes from Cam as he talked. When he shifted his body a trifle to get his right gun first, and then the left, Cam drew and fired all in one motion. An expression of intense surprise spread over Wiltrout's face. He'd never supposed any living man could beat him to the draw. Then he collapsed, and his body fell heavily to the floor.

The breathing grew heavy in the room. Catron made no move.

"Leave yore guns on the nearest table as yuh go out the back door," Cam told the bunched men. "There's a big crowd waiting for yuh out front. Better leave town—without voting phony ballots."

STILL they hesitated, looking doubtfully toward Catron for instructions.

"You heard him," drawled Catron.

They broke then, hastening to pile up the guns handed out a few minutes before. The last of the bunch fled through the back when Turner and the two other cowmen came in. All three stared at Wiltrout's body on the floor.

"A falling out inside the gang?" Turner wanted to know.

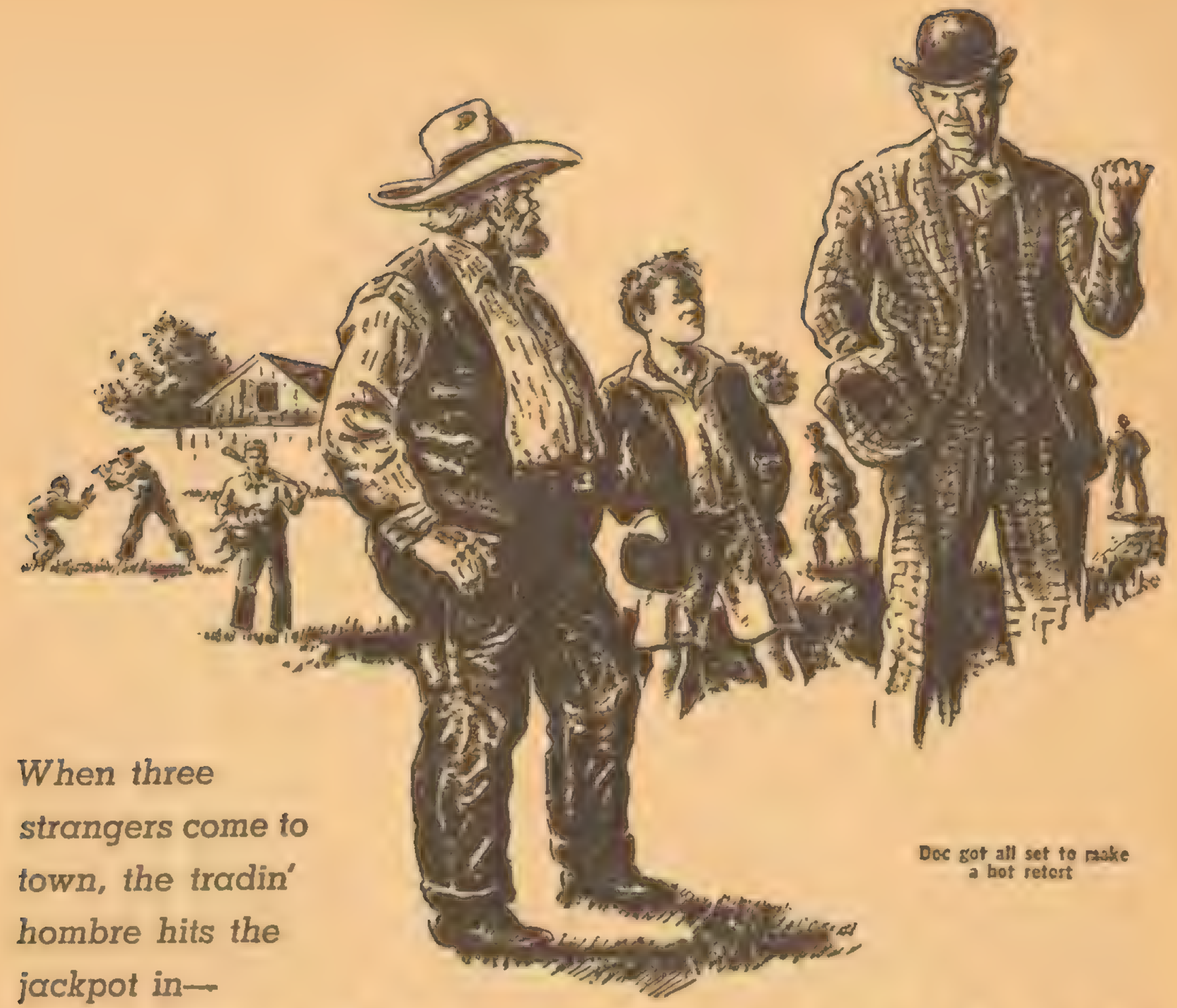
"What gang?" Catron asked quietly. "Yore opposition never was more than Wiltrout, Frank. Yuh got ideas and never bothered to find out if they was right."

"Spread the word," Cam said. "Only one candidate left, but folks ought to vote anyway."

Turner's eyes kindled. He breathed hard and shook his head in a puzzled manner. "I don't get it."

"Yuh heard Sam's words," Cam told him. "We ain't on anybody's side down here unless we get the wrong kind of officers. Folks have a right to expect justice and you'd better see to it."

Turner and his men went out. Catron scanned Cam's face closely, then unbent enough to suggest they ought to have a drink. "Make mine soda," Cam replied. "I kind of like this town after all."



Doc got all set to make a hot retort

When three strangers come to town, the tradin' hombre hits the jackpot in—

DOC SWAP'S MEDICO MIX-UP

By BEN FRANK

TWO things could always rile old Doc Swap to the point where he was as contrary as a Missouri mule and about as mean as a stepped-on rattler. One was to have something going on in Dry Bluffs that he didn't understand. The second was a wrangle with Sheriff MacLoyd, Doc's rival in the two occupations dearest to his heart, fiddle playing and swapping.

Doc waddled down Dry Bluffs' one street, scowling and cussing through his ragged white whiskers. Three strangers were in town, a fat man with a gold watch chain hung across his over-sized middle, a small boy who looked as if he'd been kept out of the sun all his life, and a big ugly hombre with cauliflower ears and a bulging coat pocket.

For two days, the strangers had been at the hotel, and for as long, Doc Swap hadn't discovered their business or who they were. To make the whole thing more aggravating, Sheriff MacLoyd knew all about these strangers, but refused to share his secret with Doc. That in itself

was enough to make the old swapper's whiskers stand on end.

"Dad-blasted, star-totin', schemin' ole—"

Doc's voice died in his throat, for standing at the edge of a vacant lot, longingly watching some kids play ball, was the pale-faced strange boy. Doc headed toward the button. He had a way with youngsters and, maybe, he could get some information from this boy. Too, Doc felt sorry for the kid. He always wore dress-up clothes and never played with the other kids. Besides, the boy's large brown eyes were filled with a deep unhappiness, and Doc figured that kids had a right to be happy.

"Howdy, son," he said, smiling in a friendly way.

The boy turned sad eyes on Doc's round, ruddy face.

"Why don't yuh get in there an' play ball?" Doc asked.

The kid pointed with his thumb. "I'm not supposed to."

Doc followed the pointing thumb and saw the burly, cauliflower-eared hombre standing in the shade of Cy Pulley's barber shop.

The man glared at Doc and fingered a bulging coat pocket. Doc felt a shiver steal over him.

"Why not?" he asked.

"Secret," the kid answered, his voice choking up.

"Allus liked secrets," Doc said hopefully. "Yuh might—"

A shadow fell across his line of vision. He glanced up and found himself staring into the hard, unpleasant eyes of the ugly stranger.

"Move along, grandpa," the man said tightly.

Doc felt a stir of anger. He didn't like to be pushed around. He got all set to make a hot retort, looked into the man's hard eyes again, and decided to keep still. Swearing under his breath, he ambled on, came to the barber shop and went in.

What he saw inside the shop halted him by the door. Sheriff MacLoyd and Cy Pulley, the barber, were in the midst of a checker game, and they were playing with the sheriff's prize possession—twenty-four hand-carved black and white checkers and a beautifully hand-made checker board.

NOW, Doc wasn't a checker player and had no use for MacLoyd's outfit, but it struck him right then that he wanted those checkers and the board, for Doc was feeling both mean and contrary. Besides, anything the sheriff owned, Doc was sure to want. For forty years, he and MacLoyd had been trying to out-swap one another.

Doc whipped off his fancy pearl-gray Stetson—he'd swapped a wind-broken old horse for the hat and considered the trade one of the highlights of his career—and wiped his shiny bald head with a red bandana.

"Might do a little—" He was about to say "swappin'" but remembering the three strangers, clamped his lips shut tight. At the moment, prying the secret from MacLoyd, Doc reckoned, came ahead of swapping.

MacLoyd had the best of Cy Pulley in the checker game. Consequently he was feeling happy.

"Might what?" he asked, smiling at Doc.

"Might do a little bettin' on yuh," Doc said quickly.

MacLoyd was pleased. A compliment from Doc was a rare thing. "Yuh'd be bettin' on the right man," he said.

"Sheriff," Doc said craftily, "you are a remarkable good checker player."

At that unexpected bit of praise, MacLoyd almost swallowed his cud of eating tobacco. "Thank yuh, Doc," he sputtered.

"Just met them strangers," Doc said blandly. "That is, the little boy an' that jasper with the ears."

MacLoyd immediately smelled a mouse, and suspicion leaped into his pale eyes. "Umm," he murmured.

"Reckon they got a reason for comin' here?" Doc went on.

"Umm," MacLoyd grunted.

"I take it yuh know all about 'em, sheriff?"

"Umm."

"I allus was a great hand to keep a secret. You could trust Cy, too."

Cy Pulley grinned and moved a checker.

"Umm," MacLoyd said again.

Doc felt a stir of anger. The sheriff's "umm's" were getting on his nerves.

"Me an' you has been friends, more or less, for forty years, an'—"

"Umm!" MacLoyd said loudly.

"Don't umm me!" Doc roared. "Yuh skinny, bow-legged ole—"

"Yuh're bested, Cy," MacLoyd said, ignoring Doc.

Doc's round, fat face turned a bright pink.

"Yuh know what I'm goin' to do?" he said hotly. "I'm goin' to swap yuh outa that checker board and men!"

MacLoyd's bony hand moved a checker wildly. He leaped to his long, bowed legs and sent a stream of brown juice across the room, dead-centering a brass spittoon.

"Lis'en, yuh fat, windy ole cuss," he yelled, "yuh got about as much chance swappin' me outa my checkers as a dead hound has of catchin' a jackrabbit!"

Doc smiled happily. It did him good to see MacLoyd upset.

"Yes, sir," he said, "I'm goin' to own them check—"

"Two things yuh ain't goin' to do!" MacLoyd bellowed. "One is, yuh ain't goin' to get my checkers! T'other is, yuh ain't goin' to get no secrets outa me!"

"Sheriff," Cy Pulley said happily, "I got yuh beat!"

MacLoyd stared at the checker board. Doc had upset him so that he'd made a wrong move, and sure enough, Cy had him.

Doc slapped his hat back on his bald head and headed out into the late afternoon sunshine, chuckling. Sheriff MacLoyd came to the door of the barber shop. He sent forth an angry hissing stream of brown juice, catching a horsefly in mid-air.

"Doc," he said loudly, "I'll be lookin' forward to your attempt to swap me outa my checker outfit. You windy old bag of cornbread and beefsteak, you couldn't swap me outa nothin'!"

Doc halted and stared about. Cy Pulley was standing beside the sheriff. Next door, Goop Gibson, the barkeep of the Palace Saloon, leaned against the batwing. And there were Dooley Dobson, the depot agent, Lou Loomis, the express man, and old Deacon Plumb. In fact, it looked to Doc as if half the citizens of Dry Bluffs had heard the sheriff's challenge.

The old swapper knew that that checker board was going to be hard to get. No doubt about it. He also realized that if he didn't meet MacLoyd's challenge, his reputation as a swapper would be lost forever. Right then, he knew what he must do. He had to go to Sugar Valley on a swapping spree.

Nesters were settling up the valley, and nesters were swappers. Swapping sharpened Doc's mind, and this was one time when he needed a mind as sharp as a cactus sticker.

His face red, his whiskers flying, he headed homeward. Of course, it was too late to start for the valley today, but early in the morning—

"Hello, mister," a voice said, and Doc found himself looking down into the strange kid's pale, wistful face.

"Where you going, mister?" the kid asked with a shy grin.

Doc pointed toward his neat white cottage at the end of the street. "Goin' there," he said. "See that covered wagon?"

The kid nodded.

"Well," Doc continued craftily, "I'll tell you a secret. I'm goin' to load my wagon tonight so's I can get an early start for Sugar Valley in the mornin'. Now, mebbe you'd like to tell me one of your secrets. Like who yuh are an—"

A footstep sounded, and Doc lifted his eyes. The man with the cauliflower ears was approaching rapidly, and he had his right hand in his bulging pocket.

Doc shivered slightly. "G'by," he mumbled to the kid, and hurried on his way.

THE next morning, Doc was up with the sun, getting his fat sleek bays ready for the drive through Sugar Valley. A little later, he got under way aboard the high spring seat of his covered wagon. When he came even with the jail, he saw that MacLoyd was up and around. Also, so was his deputy, Ham Brady.

MacLoyd gave Doc a mocking grin. "In a swappin' mood, Doc?"

Doc made no reply. "Yuh won't look so happy when I get yore checkers, yuh monkey-faced coyote!" he thought angrily.

Then he saw the fat stranger, who wore the gold watch chain, coming across from the Dry Bluffs Hotel, puffing and snorting and waving his fat arms. The stranger had been right snooty with Doc, so Doc didn't pay much attention to him. At the end of the street, he glanced over his

shoulder and noticed that the stranger was talking with MacLoyd and Ham Brady.

"Looks like a convention of fools!" Doc snorted, and spanked his fat bays into an unwilling trot.

Doc came to a low hill and started down the other side. Suddenly a tall, thin man with a mournful expression on his long face, stepped out from the shade of a cottonwood. Doc pulled his bays to a stop. Strangers always fascinated him. Besides, this one carried a black valise, and you never could tell what a strange black valise might have in it.

"Friend," the tall man said in a trembling voice, "yo're the answer to a unspoken prayer. If you hadn't come along now, I reckon I'd a-been dead in another few minutes."

Doc stared in considerable surprise.

"Do tell?" he murmured.

The man ducked his sad face. "Friend," he said weakly, "you are lookin' at Pilly Prunacker, the unhealthiest man livin'."

"No!" Doc murmured, his eyes fixed on the black valise.

"It's a fact. I am so near dead, it's a miracle howcome I'm still alive. I—yuh ain't mentioned yore name."

Doc bowed and swept off his fancy hat. "Doc Swap, at your service."

The man's sad face brightened a trifle. "Oh, thanks be, a medico! Mebbe yuh can keep me alive for another day or—"

"I ain't a medico," Doc said hastily. "I'm a swapper."

The man clapped his hand over his heart. "There it goes," he panted. "Skipity-skip, whoosh, skip. The least little shock does that to my heart."

The man dropped to his knees and jerked the black valise open. Doc's eyes bugged. The valise was full of an assortment of bottles, and the bottles were full of pills of all sizes, shapes and colors. In awed silence, he watched the stranger select a large orange pill and swallow it.

The man got up on his long shaky legs and snapped the valise shut. He smiled unhappily at Doc.

"Doc," he said faintly, "pills is a wonderful thing. In fact, without 'em, I'd be a-layin' in some cemetery with a stone over me what says, 'Here lays Pilly Prunacker, the unhealthiest hombre who ever swallowed a—" The man's sad eyes fixed on Doc's whiskery face. "Doc," he said hoarsely, "do yuh realize yuh got one foot in the grave? I can see it in your eyes. Your poor liver! Man, I'm astonished that your stoved-up liver ain't put yuh in a box long ago!"

With shaking hands, Pilly unsnapped the valise and fished out a bottle of large purple pills. He uncorked the bottle, poured out a pill and handed it to Doc.

"Take it!" he wheezed. "Hurry, man, or yo're a goner as sure as I'm the sickest man this side of a grave!"

Doc swallowed the pill. Inside, he began to feel slightly ill. He wasn't sure whether it was the purple pill or the stranger's sad eyes that made him feel that way. As for his liver, he wasn't much worried about it.

"Feel my liver cuttin' up, too," Pilly said, and took a purple pill for himself.

"Hop in," Doc invited, "if yuh want a ride."

"Thanks, friend. Yo're a life saver. My arches is busted flat."

THE man climbed up into the covered wagon, sat down beside Doc and propped the valise on his bony knees.

"Doc," he went on, "ever' man, woman an' child is full of ailments. Some, like you an' me, is smart enough to realize it an' take pills. Others ain't."

"Do tell?" Doc murmured.

"Yes, sir! Now, take me. There ain't no ailment yuh can mention what I don't have."

The man talked on and on with Doc listening in wonderment and thinking that for so sick a man, Pilly Prunacker had a right good pair of lungs.

When they drove up to the Porter homestead, Pilly was still gabbing. Loop and Puney Porter stood leaning against the split-rail pigpen, watching Doc out of distrustful eyes.

"Ain't got nothin' to swap off, Doc," Puney declared.

"Nope," Loop agreed, "we don't even want to talk—"

"Great sufferin' tomcats!" Pilly Prunacker yipped. "Man, yo're dead an' don't know it!"

"Eh?" Loop gulped.

"Man," Pilly wheezed, "yo're sick! It's your spleen. Or gizzard. Likely both. Look at your hands shakin'. An' yore eyes

a-buggin'. How many fingers am I holdin' up?"

"Why, er—" Loop, too stunned to count, sputtered.

"Can't see, eh? I knowed it!" Pilly opened his valise. "You got to have some medicine pronto."

"I ain't feelin' so well, either," Puney said weakly.

Pilly turned his sad eyes on Puney Porter. "Poor boy," he choked. "It's such a shame, you bein' so young. But when yuh got tumors an' things, yuh can't live unless—"

Doc blinked rapidly as a sudden idea came to him.

"Pilly," he asked hopefully, "ain't yuh got some pills what is good for tumors and things? Also, spleens and gizzards?"

"Have I?" Pilly smiled. "Friend, I got medicine for ever' ailment of mankind, for I've got all of them ailments myself."

"Boys," Doc said blandly to Loop and Puney, "my pardner can likely cure you of yore ailments, but, of course, he can't go around, givin' out pills for nothin'."

Both Loop and Puney had turned somewhat pale.

"How much does he charge?" Loop asked hoarsely.

"Don't really charge anything," Doc smiled. "Might do some swappin' though. Swap some pills for—"

When Doc and Pilly left the Porter place, the Porters had a handful of assorted pills. Doc had an almost new pair of riding boots, which Puney had outgrown, a fat hen, a bridle, and a large square mirror to boot. Not that Doc took much stock in mirrors, but he never made a swap unless he got some boot.

"Doc," Pilly said unhappily, "I'd a-been willin' to give them two sick men a few of my—"

"Swappin' is better," Doc cut in quickly. "People don't appreciate things they get for nothin'. Ain't human nature."

"I guess yo're right," Pilly agreed.

A bow-legged, lop-eared horseman came riding up over a low hill, and waved to Doc. He was Chuck Dooley, a Double-O ranny who had a hankering for bright-colored shirts.

"Howdy, Doc," he growled. "How's tricks?"

Doc shook his head sadly and nudged Pilly Prunacker.

"Pilly," he murmured, "why would a young feller like Chuck look so sickly and run down?"

Pilly's long fingers gripped the wagon seat. "Great sufferin' tomcats!" he exploded. "Worst case of anaemia I ever seen—except my own case. Friend, have yuh ordered your casket?"

Chuck's gray eyes widened. "Whatsat?" he choked.

"Anaemia," Pilly repeated sadly. He reached back into the wagon and picked up the mirror. "Have a look at yoreself. Look't your eyes. Your color. Do yuh feel your heart beatin'?"

"Come to think of it, I do," Chuck said worriedly. "Had a headache this mornin', too. Kind of feel weak an'—"

Pilly opened the valise. "I know how yo're sufferin'," he said. "Suffer that way myself. These green pills—"

WHEN Chuck Dooley rode on, he had a dozen green pills. Doc had a pair of spurs, a spare bright-red shirt, worn chaps, and a ball of stout twine to boot.

Pilly Prunacker sighed deeply and helped himself to a green pill. "I hope that poor cowboy don't die before he gets back home," he muttered.

Doc smiled happily. "I reckon he'll be all right as long as your medicine holds out," he observed cheerfully.

At noon, they stopped under a shade tree near Sugar Creek, and for the promise of a chicken dinner, Pilly found himself well enough to dress the fat hen. Doc fed his bays and got a fire going. Soon the smell of roasting chicken filled the warm, bright air.

Pilly took two brown pills and smiled sadly at Doc.

"Them is for my digestion," he explained.

"Digestion is one thing I ain't had no trouble—"

Doc's voice faded away, and his keen blue eyes widened and fixed on the covered wagon.

Pilly turned his head and gaped. Abruptly he reached for a bottle of yellow pills.

"I'm a-seein' things!" he wheezed.

A small boy sat on the spring seat of Doc's covered wagon. His face was pale, and his unhappy eyes were fixed on the

roasting hen. He was the strange boy who had come to Dry Bluffs with the fat man and the man with cauliflowered ears.

"Where'd you come from?" Doc gasped.

The boy grinned shyly. "From under that pile of bedding. I slipped out of my hotel room before daylight and hid under—"

"Why'd yuh do that?" Doc demanded.

"I'm running away," the boy answered. "I'm tired of being guarded all the time. I want to ride horses and swim and play ball and—"

"What's your name, son?"

"Jimmy VanGerpen."

Doc gave a start, and the pieces of the puzzle fell into place. Someplace he'd read about a Jimmy VanGerpen, the kid who'd been left an orphan—and twenty million dollars! Now Doc reckoned he understood why the kid was kept under guard. And then, looking into Jimmy's unhappy eyes, he knew that money or no, the kid was missing the fun that was his due as a boy.

"What'll them people say when they miss yuh?" he asked.

"You mean my Uncle JJ and my bodyguard?" The kid suddenly grinned. "Uncle JJ will be afraid that my disappearance will cause a crash in Wall Street."

"Looks like I'll have to take you back to town, then," Doc said.

The button's face fell. "I always wanted to sleep out under the stars," he wailed, "Always! And my uncle— Please, mister, just let me stay out tonight!"

Doc did some fast thinking. He remembered Sheriff MacLoyd and the checkers. He remembered the snooty fat man with the gold watch chain, and, also, how the kid's bodyguard had pushed him around. He glanced at Pilly Prunacker.

"Pilly," he grinned, "reckon we should let Jimmy sleep out tonight, or would that make him sick?"

"What if it does make him sick," Pilly said, "I got medicine for ever' ailment there is."

"If somebody come along an' wondered who Jimmy is, do you think you could pretend to be his pa?"

"Pa? Oh, oh, there it goes—skipity-skip, whoosh, skip. Where's my heart pills. Why, yes, Doc, I could claim to be—"

"Son," Doc beamed, "mebbe if you was to put on a red shirt, an ole pair of chaps an' them ridin' boots an' spurs, you could stay out tonight. 'Course, tomorrow you'll have to go back to this Uncle JJ."

The boy kicked off his shiny shoes and began to put on the boots. A touch of color had leaped into his pale cheeks.

"Always wanted to dress in old clothes," he grinned.

"Also," Doc added thoughtfully, "it might be a good idea for you to get yore face kind of dirty."

"Dirt is full of germs," Pilly muttered, "but I got some pills that'll knock the socks off any germs."

"I liked you right from the first," Jimmy said to Doc. "Everybody, except you, treats me like I'm a baby—and just because I've got twenty million dollars."

"Twenty million dollars!" Pilly yipped. "Great sufferin' tomcats! There goes my heart again. Where's them orange pills?"

DOC'S fat hand flashed out and got the bottle of orange pills. "Pilly," he said flatly, "if you want these pills, yuh got to promise yuh'll not mention that twenty—"

"Gotta have my medicine," Pilly panted. "Doc, I promise!"

Smiling, the old swapper handed over the bottle.

"My Uncle JJ has stomach trouble when the Wall Street market slips," the button observed.

"Got just what he needs," Pilly said, pulling out a bottle of white pills.

"Jimmy," Doc asked as they sat about the camp fire, eating roasted hen, "how come you are livin' in Dry Bluffs?"

"My Uncle JJ thought I needed to get out West," the button answered. "He thought I needed sunshine and fresh air. Besides I own some shares in a mine near here—so we came to Dry Bluffs."

"I see," Doc said, but he was thinking that what this boy needed more than anything was a chance to romp and play like other boys.

In the meantime, Pilly Prunacker was making headway with the roast chicken. In spite of his many ailments, he could eat.

Early that afternoon, they drove up to Puzz Piggley's homestead. Puzz was a loose-jointed, yellow-headed man, whose only passion in life was working puzzles.

He came to the door of his cabin and looked at Doc out of hopeful eyes. "Got a puzzle to swap to me, Doc?" he asked.

Doc gave Pilly a nudge. "Why," he asked in a hushed voice, "would that feller's hair look kinda faded?"

Pilly clutched the wagon seat with his bony fingers. "Doc," he said hoarsely, "there is the worst case, next to mine, of fallen arches I ever did see!"

Puzz Piggley stared at the man. "Fallen whiches?" he asked.

"Arches," Pilly repeated. "Look't yore eyes—wrinkles at the corners. Hair fadin'. The bones in your legs warpin'." Pilly reached for the mirror and held it so Puzz could see himself. "Take a good look an' start sayin' your prayers. By this time next week, you'll likely be pushin' up daisies, unless—"

Puzz stared at his reflection.

"Unless what?" he asked hoarsely.

"Unless yuh take somethin' to strengthen your bones. Feel your heart beatin'? Hear the blood rushin' through your ears?"

Puzz blinked rapidly, while his face grew paler. "Come to think of it," he mumbled, "my heart is beatin'."

"Pilly," Doc asked hopefully, "can't yuh do somethin' for Puzz' heart?"

When they left Puzz Piggley leaning weakly against the door sill with three kinds of pills in his trembling hands, Doc had added to his collection of swapping goods a wheezy old paint horse, a red bandana and a box of assorted fishhooks and sinkers to boot.

At the next turn in the Sugar Creek trail, they met two horsemen—MacLoyd's deputy, Ham Brady, and the cauliflower-eared man, Jimmy VanGerpen's bodyguard. "I better hide under the bedding," Jimmy said in a frightened voice.

Doc looked at the boy. It was hard to believe that this dirty faced youngster, dolled up in a red shirt, chaps, boots and spurs, was the same pale faced kid who was worth twenty million dollars. Doc grinned. "You don't need to hide," he said. "Just don't talk."

HAM BRADY, when he wasn't acting as deputy, loafed in summers and trapped in winters, and all seasons of the year, indoors and out, wore a squirrel skin cap on his shaggy head. Now, he unloaded a cow-choking cud of finecut and pawed the tail of the cap out of his bleary eyes. "Doc," he asked, "have yuh seen anything of a kid?"

Doc nodded. "Yep. Got one right here with me."

"I don't mean just any kid," Ham growled. "I mean that kid who come to Dry Bluffs t'other day."

"Yuh mean a kid with a pale face an' good clothes?"

Ham nodded and pawed a bulging sack of finecut from a pocket. "All heck has busted loose," he said sadly. "This kid has disappeared, an' we're scourin' the country for him."

"Man," Pilly Prunacker yipped, "don't stuff that filthy tobacco into yore mouth!"

Ham, his fistful of finecut half-way to his mouth, almost fell out of the saddle. "Says which?" he choked.

"Yo're next to bein' dead as it is," Pilly went on, "without hurryin' it up with tobacco. Yore blood is—"

"Look," Ham said, "I been chewin' this stuff for twenty—"

"No wonder yore blood has turned to the color of creek water," Pilly cut in. "I marvel that you're able to set in a saddle. I hope you don't have a family. It's so sad to see a widow and her children starvin' because her man has—"

Slowly Ham returned the finecut to the sack. "I ain't got no family except this hoss an' two dogs," he said.

"A dog without a master is heart-breakin'," Pilly sighed.

"Ham," Doc murmured sadly, "looks like yo're a goner. An' this city feller with yuh don't look none too well, neither."

When Ham Brady and the bodyguard went on their way, they left behind one sack of finecut, a jackknife, a fancy leather belt, a silver combination cigar clipper and bottle opener, and a compass. In return, they had an assortment of pills, good for man or beast, and a faint hope that they might live to see the setting sun.

Wide-eyed, Jimmy Van Gerpen watched them ride away. "Why," he stammered, "they didn't recognize me!"

"Son," Doc chuckled, "I reckon yo're a changed younker."

"Whoopee!" the kid yelled.

That war-whoop made Pilly Prunacker take three blue pills to quiet his nerves.

A little later, Doc drove up to Ed Lunt's place. Ed took one look into the mirror after hearing Pilly tell him how sick he looked, and decided his wife was next thing to being a widow. Pilly cheerfully parted with some medicine for which Ed was more than willing to give Doc an old lariat, a chocolate cake, a jar of home-cured sausage, and an old saddle blanket.

Along toward sundown, Doc made camp at his favorite spot on the bank of Sugar Creek. He bridled the old paint, tied on the saddle blanket with the lariat and gave Jimmy a riding lesson. The kid was delighted. He'd never had so much fun in his life, and he got dirtier than a pig in a mud puddle. Pilly Prunacker, feeling the pangs of hunger above his many aches and pains, built a fire and cooked supper.

After they'd eaten, Doc took inventory of his accumulations: boots, a fat hen that had been, bridle, eggs, mirror, spurs, red shirt, chaps, fishhooks and plenty of twine for lines, a paint horse, red bandana (which Jimmy now wore around his neck), sack of finecut, jackknife, leather belt, silver cigar clipper and bottle opener, compass, lariat, what was left of a chocolate cake, sausage and a saddle blanket. Not bad, considering the fact that they had cost him nothing, but the old swapper wasn't happy. Even if he had found out about the strangers, he hadn't hit upon a way to get the sheriff's checkers.

THINKING of the sheriff, he lifted his eyes, and saw MacLoyd's rattly old buggy approaching through the dusk along the trail. The sheriff had a passenger. The fat man with the gleaming gold chain across his vest. MacLoyd's bony face wore a harried look.

"Doc," he said hoarsely, "you might as well know the truth an' maybe you can help us. This feller is J.J. VanGerpen, uncle and guardian of little Jimmy VanGerpen, the millionaire orphan who you've likely read about in the papers. The boy's disappeared, and we gotta find him!"

"If we don't find him," J.J. VanGerpen wheezed, "there'll be a crash in Wall Street."

"Do tell?" Doc murmured.

"In fact, if it gets out he's lost, the market will go to pieces. That's why we're keeping this quiet."

At that moment, Jimmy came riding up on the old paint. Doc nodded his head toward Pilly and the boy. "A couple of jaspers who're ridin' with me," he said carelessly. "This feller is the sickest man this side of the grave."

JJ glanced from Pilly to Jimmy and shuddered slightly.

"That kid looks like a tramp," he said in an undertone.

There was nothing wrong with Pilly's ears. "That kid is all right!" he bristled. "Ain't a healthier kid in the world. Ain't had to give him one single pill. Speakin' of pills, yuh look mighty sick, mister."

A half-hour later, when Sheriff MacLoyd and J.J. VanGerpen left Doc's camp, they were sure of only one thing—that they were two very sick men with a very slight chance of ever seeing the light of another day. Each had an assortment of pills for which they had traded an old shot-gun, a spare saddle, a buggy whip, a rain coat, and a gold watch chain!

That night, Jimmy had his wish fulfilled. He slept out under the stars. The next morning, his eyes were shining and his cheeks filled with color.

"Today," Doc told him, "you can ride that horse. You can kick outa yore clothes an' go swimmin' in the creek. You can dig fishworms and go fishin'. But this evenin', you got to go back to Dry Bluffs an' yore Uncle JJ."

"I'll go back," Jimmy said, "but I'll never forget last night and today."

Throughout the morning, Jimmy did everything a healthy boy loves to do. Doc sat in the shade, watching, while Pilly took his various pills from time to time.

"Pilly," Doc asked suddenly, "where'd yuh get them pills?"

"Got 'em from a travelin' medicine man," Pilly replied. "This feller explained to me how sick I am an' let me have all his medicine for my saddle horse, six-gun and forty dollars."

Doc fished out the jackknife, took a purple pill and sliced it in two. It was white on the inside. He took a few red and green pills and cut into them. They, too, were white on the inside. He held the sliced halves to his tongue. They all tasted alike. They tasted like bread dough.

"Pilly," he said, "you ain't sick."

Pilly stared at Doc. "Now, Doc, you know I—"

"You've been made a fool of. Your

sickness is all in your head. That medicine man took yuh for a ride. These pills ain't nothin' more'n flour and water with a little color on the outside. You ain't no sicker'n I am, which ain't at all!"

PILLY stared at the sliced pills. He tasted them. Slowly the truth sank in, and anger mounted to his long face. He began to cuss. He picked up the black valise and headed for the creek. A moment later, Doc heard a heavy splash. When Pilly returned to the camp, instead of the valise, he was carrying a heavy hickory club in his hands.

"Doc," he said hoarsely, "I reckon I'll bid you good day."

"Where yuh goin'?" Doc asked.

"I'm goin' to look for a certain travelin' man," Pilly answered flatly. "An' when I find him, I'm goin' to get my horse, gun an' forty bucks back, or that hombre is goin' to get all his brains beat out!"

Cussing with every step, Pilly Prunacker headed west along the Sugar Creek trail, swinging his club savagely. Grinning hugely, Doc leaned back against an oak and let the wheels in his head turn.

That evening when Doc Swap and Jimmy VanGerpen walked into Bluff County jail office, they found J.J. VanGerpen, Sheriff MacLoyd, Ham Brady and the cauliflower-eared man in a huddle.

"I don't know what to do," the fat JJ was wailing. "If Wall Street finds out that the boy's lost—"

"I see all you jaspers have recovered from yore ailments," Doc said dryly. "You even look like yo're alive."

The four men glared at the old swapper. MacLoyd uncrossed his bony, bowed legs.

"Shore, we're alive," he snapped. "We all had Doc Lindell check us over, an' there ain't a thing wrong with us. That feller with them pills was just a downright fake, an'—"

"So was them pills you traded for," Doc cut in. "Which goes to show how big a fool wrong thinkin' can make out of a man." He put one arm about Jimmy's shoulders and pointed a fat finger at JJ. "Take you, for example. Because Jimmy here is worth twenty million dollars, you think he can't be like other boys. You've like to killed him with unhappiness. He was so unhappy that he run away."

J.J. Van Gerpen dropped weakly on a chair. "Why—why, that is Jimmy!" he sputtered. "An' he was riding a horse, and he's got on old clothes, and his face needs washing!"

"Shore," Doc said angrily. "He's just like all boys, and he's got a right to act like one. I reckon these last two days has been the happiest he ever knowed!"

JJ got to his feet. His face slowly began to regain some of its color. "Jimmy," he asked hoarsely, "does this man know what he's talking about? Is that why you ran away?"

Jimmy grinned broadly. "Doc Swap knows everything!"

"Phooey!" Sheriff MacLoyd snorted. "He don't—"

"I know," Doc said with frigid dignity, "a skinny ole coyote who wouldn't like to be laughed at over lettin' himself get scared into swappin' for some fake pills!"

MacLoyd's face turned a bright red.

"Jimmy," JJ said kindly, "let's go over to the hotel and talk things over. I've got an idea that it's time we had an understanding. From now on, things are going to be different."

Jimmy gave Doc a smile and followed his uncle through the door.

Both MacLoyd and Ham Brady were eyeing Doc worriedly.

"Doc," the sheriff said hoarsely, "maybe it would be just as well if folks around Dry Bluffs didn't learn about them pills Ham an' me took."

Doc's pudgy hand came out of a coat pocket. From it dangled a fancy gold watch chain.

"Never was no hand for watches," he murmured. "Or chains!"

MacLoyd swallowed hard.

"Got a handmade checker board I might swap for that chain," he said.

"I'd have to have some boot."

"Might throw in them twenty-four checkers to boot."

Doc dropped the chain on the sheriff's battered desk and gathered up the checkers and the board. "Come to think of it," he said, waddling toward the door, "I've plumb forgot about them pills."

Outside, he began to whistle softly as he ambled toward Cy Pulley's barber shop. He reckoned that now was as good a time as any to let the citizens of Dry Bluffs see him with the sheriff's board and checkers.

Two guns exploded, one a fraction of a second before the other

SHOWDOWN IN DOS PUEBLOS

By RUEL McDANIEL and JOHN H. LATHAM

Old Marshal Nostrom thinks Rut Gipson is overrated both as card shark and gun sharp—and risks his life on it!

MARSHAL Sam Nostrom wiped the particles of *tacos* from his grayish-brown mustache and then held up his mustache with his left hand while he drank coffee from a saucer with his right. He put the empty saucer back on the wooden counter and poured more hot coffee into it from the cup and blew it slowly.

As he raised up from the blowing chore, he winced and his hand moved to his right side. The old wound was bothering him a lot tonight and the thought filled his mind with a premonition. Of course, he knew his aching side had nothing to do with it, but it seemed that every time that old wound set up a series of hurts, something always happened. Something violent. He shrugged, and picked up the saucer again.

Then he heard the shooting. He dropped the saucer and spilled black coffee over the counter. He knew the shooting came from the saloon next door. Three quick blasts, then the excited mumble of men's voices.

The six-foot-two lawman grabbed his black narrow turned-up brim hat, a gaunt and grim figure as he stalked out. He hit the dirt street, broken here and there by miniature gullies from last month's sudden rain, on the run, but his speed did not conceal the slight limp forced on him by his aching side.

The marshal knew what he would find. When he shoved through the bat-wing doors into the Silver Dollar Saloon, lean, sallow-faced Rut Gipson was just jamming a hot six-gun back into the clip holster under his left armpit.

The gambler's thin lips curled into a crooked smile, and Sam Nostrom felt contempt for the man.

"Self defense, Marshal," the gambler said almost boastfully. "Any man in the room will tell you that."

A man in dusty Levi's and brush jacket lay face down on the floor, a six-gun in the trampled sawdust near one outflung hand. He was dead, the marshal saw at a glance. A green-velvet poker table, its worn top whisky-stained, had been knocked over, spilling cards and chips over the floor. Barney Smith, the bleary-eyed old swamper, fretted around with a broom. He looked up and nodded.

"Rut's sayin' it straight," he said, his old voice cracked and whisky-harsh. "Shorty kicked over the table and made his draw. Rut was lucky enough to beat him to it."

SAM NOSTROM had known it would be like this. He didn't have to look at the other men in the room for their nods of confirmation. Once he had thought this town was tamed, the vicious rattle of gunfire gone forever from its streets. All that was before Rut Gipson drifted in, a man with the same phenomenal luck with guns as with cards.

Twice in three months the gambler had shot down men who sat in his stud-poker game. Both times it had been self-defense, according to all witnesses. But Sam Nostrom knew in his heart that it was murder. None of these reckless, headstrong cowpunchers from the neighboring ranches was a match for the cold-eyed killer.

And now a third victim lay dead on the sawdust-covered floor.

"Shorty Ramon's been ridin' for the Circle S nearly five years," Marshal Nostrom said slowly. "He has a lot of friends, and they'll be in town with blood in their eyes tonight. Close your game, Gipson. Make yourself scarce for a few days. We don't want any more killin'."

"I'm in the clear," the gambler boasted. "You can't close my game, Nostrom. I've as much right to make a living as anybody. Card-dealing's all I know."

"You heard me," Sam Nostrom growled, his eyes suddenly half-closed and cold. "Don't open that game ag'in!"

"You can't make laws to suit yourself," the gambler argued, meeting the marshal's eyes unflinchingly.

"I was hired to make the law in Dos Pueblos!" Nostrom said tightly. "Barney, get the undertaker. I'll send somebody out to the Circle S to notify Bill Slaughter about Shorty's death."

Rut Gipson looked tauntingly at the aging lawman.

"Looks like that slug I sent through your hide back there on the Border didn't teach you a thing," he muttered through a twisted smile.

Back in the Greasy Sack, the marshal tried to finish the *tacos* and found them tasteless. The tepid coffee gagged in his throat. Worry gnawed at his vitals like a persistent wood rat. He shoved the food aside and rested his chin in his cupped hands, his gray eyes slitted and his face haggard, going over the problem that had plagued him for almost three months.

Rut had killed several men before he made his appearance in the boom town of Dos Pueblos, but his skirts were clear. Upon his arrival, Marshal Nostrom had his activities checked back for three years by the Rangers. Where he was and what he'd done the five years and eight months before that, Sam Nostrom well knew. He had been in state's prison, where the evidence and hard work of Nostrom had sent him, along with the rest of his owlhoot gang.

The stretch had been cut by more than four years through good behavior. Time and imprisonment evidently had taught Rut Gipson a lesson. He had operated within the law since his release. He even had made a point of looking up Marshal Nostrom when he arrived in Dos Pueblos and assuring him of his legal conduct.

No, there were no flaws in Rut Gipson's record since his release, and that prison sen-

tence had cleaned the slate prior to that time. But in the marshal's thoughts was the knowledge that the gambler was too fast and too lucky—with both guns and cards.

Something had to be done about the pale-faced gambler, he told himself, but he searched his mind for answer, without finding a hint.

Marshal Sam Nostrom had another reason to worry. Once he, himself, had been almost legendary in the Southwest for his lightning draw. But in that gun battle with the owl-hooters a slug had ripped through his side and lodged against his backbone, partially paralyzing his right side. He had brought the outlaws in, with the added satisfaction of hearing them sentenced to prison. But the bewildering speed of that famous right hand was gone.

Rising, Nostrom flipped a quarter on the counter for the dark-eyed Mexican girl and left. On impulse he went back into the Silver Dollar, found a few customers standing at the bar, and thin, decrepit Barney Smith, the swamper, playing solitaire at a table in the back. Rut Gipson was not around.

Nostrom stood idly watching the old man shuffle the cards. He was conscious of the cold stare of the men at the bar, and knew their ugly thoughts as if they had spoken them aloud. Rut Gipson had made a bid for gun supremacy of Dos Pueblos, and obviously the news was getting around that the marshal was backing down.

A FAINT, ironic smile touched the lawman's lips. You couldn't jail a man for being lucky. You could only sit back and hope that the slim gambler would press his luck too far.

"Speck of blood there," said old Barney, scratching at the back of one of the cards. "Rut and Shorty was dealin' with this deck when they up and started cussin' and shootin'."

Struck by a thought, Nostrom pitched fifty cents on the table and tapped Barney on the shoulder.

"Go down to the livery stable and tell Pete to saddle my horse," he ordered.

The swamper got up, his faded eyes gleaming as he clutched the coin and eyed the sparkling bottles at the bar. The marshal sat down at the table and continued the game of solitaire. Outwardly he was calm, but his heart-beat quickened at the thought forming.

When he got up to leave, he stuck the deck of cards in his pocket with apparent carelessness.

It was after dark when the marshal jogged back to town and he felt some sense of duty performed, for he had ridden out and exacted Bill Slaughter's word that he would keep his riders at the ranch that night. That would avoid more trouble. He couldn't blame the Circle S riders for wanting to avenge Shorty's death. But legally Rut Gipson had been within his rights, and even if it did gall the marshal, it was his duty to protect him so long as he was within the law.

There was no hint in the bright-lighted saloons and the boisterous talk that spilled out of them that death so recently had stalked the Silver Dollar, and Sam Nostrom shook his head as he thought of the coldness of men and the cheapness of life in a frontier town.

The lawman pulled off his hat and wiped his face and high forehead with his blue-checkered handkerchief, and a faint evening breeze moved along the hardpan street. It touched his face with freshness and Sam saw it pick up bits of paper and dust particles and move them along as though trying to cleanse Dos Pueblos of some of its sin.

The marshal left his cayuse at the livery stable and went to his tiny office in the 'dobe jail. He was tired and hungry, with a throbbing pain in his side. But instead of going to the Greasy Sack for a bite to eat and then lying down on the cot in the jail, as was his custom, he closed the shutters and lighted the kerosene lantern on his spur-scarred desk.

Sitting in his old swivel chair, the marshal spread the cards out on the desk top and studied them with narrowed eyes. He shuffled them, made a slow cut, and again dealt the pasteboards, this time with the backs up. He could find nothing wrong with the cards, and the eager light in his puckered gray eyes faded. The idea that had touched him back there in the saloon played him false.

Sam Nostrom leaned back in his chair and pulled the makings from his vest pocket. He spilled rough cut tobacco into a crimped brown paper, and was putting a twist on the quirly when he heard a slight scraping noise at the window.

It might have been a mouse, or a breath of wind rattling the shutters, but twenty years of badge-toting had instilled in him an abiding caution. He kicked back the chair. One booted foot lashed out and knocked the lantern off the desk. The room was plunged into immediate darkness, and from outside the

window a gun sent two quick stabs of flame into the darkened office.

Sam rolled back and drew his gun. He thumbed the hammer and slammed a shot through the closed shutters, then lay listening. He heard the quick-striking thud of boots on the rickety wooden sidewalk outside.

He scrambled to the door, cursing his slowness, and flung it open on an empty, moon-drenched street. Down the way men spilled out of the Silver Dollar and other saloons, shouting questions, and the marshal waited until they were near before he asked a question.

"See anybody running down that way?"

"Nary a soul," was the answer. He had expected that.

He turned back into his office, lighted the lantern and sat down, another question added to the taunting list and he felt suddenly old and bitter and helpless. The bright faces on the cards seemed to mock him, and with a gesture of impotent rage, he swept them to the floor.

At nine o'clock he made his usual rounds. He went up Colima Street and down the shadow-shrouded alley behind Rucker's feed store, knowing every inch of the ground, every nook and corner among the blacked-out buildings. Instead of going along Main Street to check the saloons first as usual, he turned south on Sabine and for twenty minutes prowled the Mexican section of the town. He was saving the Silver Dollar until last.

FINALLY, he turned back, with no definite decision in mind, a feeling of futility riding him hard.

None of that showed in his demeanor when he shoved through the sagging bat-wing doors of the Silver Dollar and stood, thumbs hooked in his crossed gun belts, carefully inspecting the night's crowd. He looked grim, bulky, impervious, a hard man whose steel-trap mouth and level eyes bespoke a spirit that would not deviate from whatever course of action he set for himself.

An unaccustomed, brooding silence filled the saloon. Two or three men nodded curtly to him. A sullen "howdy" or two greeted him. He moved toward the back of the big, barn-like room, murkily lighted by half a dozen lanterns suspended from the rafters by wire, and his heavy face mirrored apparent unconcern for the open antagonism of the citizens, but inside him the growing futility pressed upon him.

He saw nothing of Rut Gipson, but he did see something that filled him with dismay and anger. Whitey Small, a tow-headed Circle S puncher was standing at the bar, his lips curled in a half sneer, his eyes bleary and bloodshot. Sam Nostrom turned to the bar and ordered a *tequila grande.*

"Think you've had enough, Whitey?" he asked, toying with the drink. "Maybe you better hit leather and ride. I'd hate to jail you."

"Try and do it!" Whitey snarled drunkenly. "You may've been a regular gun-cat in yore day, Nostrom, but I think the wolf in you has turned to yellow coyote. You're afraid of that gun-slingin' tinhorn gambler!"

The marshal's face went white and hard, but his voice was even when he spoke.

"I know how you feel, Whitey. Reckon I'd feel the same way in your boots, since you and Shorty Ramon were bunk mates. But just the same, I'm not lettin' you get out of line. Give me yore gun!"

The sharp, implacable command, backed by the lawman's cold stare, was too much for the puncher. He handed over the gun, but there was contempt on his lips, and the look stopped Nostrom like a knife.

"Why don't you lift Rut Gipson's gun?" Small demanded.

With that taunting remark ringing in his ears, Nostrom turned and walked through the door, shoulders squared, feeling the taut silence and hostile stares. Outside, his shoulders sagged, and he gritted his teeth against the sick sensation in his throat.

He felt that he should have yanked the boy in and let him sober up behind bars, but he knew how he felt and wouldn't do it.

A scared, excited little *muchacho* came running up to tell him about a knife fight in a Mexican *cantina.* The marshal hurried after the lad. The fight was over when he got there, limping because his right side pained him more than usual, and one of the culprits was gone. The other, a slim, swarthy youth, was drunk and had a deep knife slash in his arm.

The marshal took the Mexican by the livery stable and had the veterinarian bandage his arm. Doc Stover was home in bed by this time of night, and he resented being awakened unless a case was serious. Nostrom locked the boy in jail to sober up, and as he left he picked up the deck of cards from the floor and dropped them in his pocket. He

shrugged, wondering why he persisted in hoping.

A few minutes later, Sam Nostrom knew, when he entered the Silver Dollar, that some unusual excitement was going on. Most of the customers were ganged around a poker table in the back of the room. He adjusted his eyes to the smoke-hazy gloom, and he recognized Rut Gipson and Whitey Small. His lips tightened when he realized that both men were openly disregarding his orders. They were playing two-handed stud.

Halting unobtrusively on the edge of the circle around the table, Sam Nostrom watched the play for several minutes. Whitey Small was evidently winning. Sam felt a keen sense of relief when he saw that the puncher was still unarmed. Rut Gipson, he noted, had a flat Smith & Wesson .38 stuck down in the waistband of his trousers.

The gambler, his face a pallid blur under his broad-brimmed black sombrero, seemed perfectly at ease. Whitey Small's whisky-flushed face revealed the terrific mental strain that the young puncher was under, and his bloodshot blue eyes dropped several times to the gun in Gipson's belt with a calculating look.

NOSTROM watched silently. He was remembering that Rut Gipson had killed an unarmed man before, in self-defense, when the victim snatched a six-gun from the gambler's waistband. The gun was stuck in an awkward place, as easily accessible to Whitey Small as it was to Gipson. To Nostrom, it looked like a plant.

Absorbed in the play, neither of the men noticed the marshal for several minutes. Then the gambler looked up, and his cold eyes contracted and the smile seemed to freeze on his face.

"Reckon this is one game you'll appreciate, Marshal," he said, finally. "Whitey has won just about everything but my Sunday pants, and it looks like he'll have them soon."

"So I see," Nostrom answered curtly.

He made no move to stop the game, and Rut Gipson's smile turned slightly sardonic. It was obvious that Marshal Sam Nostrom's guns were all that the gambler feared in Dos Pueblos. And now Sam could see in Rut's face that he thought he had even the marshal bluffed.

Whitey dealt a hand, watching the gambler's face more often than the fall of the cards, and won a sizeable pot. Then it was Rut Gipson's deal. He riffled the pasteboards with deft, expert fingers and placed them in front of the puncher. Whitey cut, and Sam Nostrom could see nothing wrong with the deal. But the odd four-fingered cut kept suggesting something. The cowboy won again.

Whitey shuffled. The gambler made a four-fingered cut and watched the puncher flip out the cards with one hand. The marshal drew in a deep breath, his eyes narrowing. He waited until the hand was over, then tapped Whitey on the shoulder. Time to look into this odd cut, he thought.

"Cash in, son," he said. "Better take my advice and trail along home. I'll set in a few hands with Rut."

Whitey Small started to argue, then he saw the glint in Nostrom's eyes and reluctantly cashed in. The marshal sat down, facing the gambler, and a slight smile sucked at the corners of his hard mouth.

"Your luck has always been danged puzzlin' to me, Rut," he drawled. "First time I've ever seen you lose. Maybe that famous goddess of chance has deserted you at last."

Men's harsh breathing sounded loud in the ensuing silence, but Rut Gipson's voice was as calm as ever.

"I've always wanted to play with you, Sam," he said.

Nostrom bought a hundred dollars worth of chips. He played with casual deliberateness, knowing from old encounters that he could stand the strain, yet feeling it in the tightness of his chest and the dryness of his throat.

His smile widened perceptibly when he saw the tiny beads of sweat forming on the gambler's sallow brow. Rut Gipson had his left shoulder hunched a little forward, and the gesture told Nostrom that the gambler was wearing his shoulder gun. It confirmed his belief that the gun in Rut's waistband was a plant.

The game went on, with the luck changing hands several times. The breathing of the men in the room grew more harsh. When the gambler was keyed taut with nervous tension, the marshal played his ace. He leaned back in his chair and pulled out the deck of cards that he had picked up in his office, placing them deliberately in the center of the table.

"Shorty Ramon lost his life and his money with these cards," he said softly. "I'd like to deal a few hands with them. Maybe they'll

change somebody's luck."

Nostrom caught the tenseness of the crowd around the table. The feeling showed in the sudden icy alertness of the gambler's eyes, and in the quick breath he sucked in, as if fortifying himself inwardly. There was a quick movement to get from behind the two players, out of line of possible gunfire.

Rut Gipson moistened his lips and nodded. Sam Nostrom shuffled the cards with slow care. He placed the deck in front of the gambler, and watched him cut with his left hand, noting the relaxed right hand on the edge of the table.

"I noticed you always made a four-fingered cut with the other deck," Nostrom said, and queried gently. "Why not now?"

"It's not a rule of poker," the gambler retorted. "I can cut any blasted way I please!"

THE silence grew explosive and Nostrom returned Gipson's stare across the green-velvet table. Sweat glistened on Rut Gipson's face, but the rigid way he sat the chair suggested to Sam the leashed power of a supple, quick-striking cat.

The marshal reached out with his right hand, slowly, and picked up the cards. It was a deliberate gesture, seemingly suicidal if the game ended in gunplay, for Sam knew that every man in the room knew he had made his reputation as a lightning right-hand draw.

"I'll show you why not," Nostrom said, almost gently. He realized he was acting on suspicion, not facts. If his suspicion played him false, he would be the butt of every joke in town, if not Rut Gipson's next victim. If he failed and lived, his own conscience would force him to apologize to the gambler. And yet he felt an urgency to run all the risk.

It was a long gamble he must take. He moved his right shoulder slightly and the pain made him wince.

"This trick has already cost the lives of three men, and now—" He cut the sentence.

Exerting pressure on the sides of the deck with his thumb and three fingers, the lawman cut an ace. He repeated the awkward process several times, and each time he split the deck he turned up an ace. The gambler's face turned a sickly muddy yellow, and his breath rasped loud in the abrupt stillness.

"The other three fellows that caught this little stunt died," the marshal said flatly. "Now let me show you something else. Oddly I didn't find the trick when I examined the cards. Your cut let the cat out."

He shifted the deck. By exerting the same pressure on the ends of the cards, he cut a queen. He made three cuts, each time turning up a lady. Then he stood up with casual deliberateness. Still using his right hand, he reached across the table and lifted the gun from the gambler's waistband and covered him with it.

"You're under arrest," he said quietly. "Stand up!"

There was a tight smile on Rut Gipson's face as his hand streaked under his coat and brought out a six-gun. It seemed sheer madness for him to draw in the face of the weapon in Sam Nostrom's hand, but he didn't hesitate.

Two guns exploded, one a fraction of a second before the other. The slight interval spelled the difference between life and death for Rut Gipson. He half-rose, then toppled over on the table, one hand clutching at the spreading red stain where life seeped out of a gaping wound in his chest.

"You—you're a good gambler," he managed. "You figured out that gun was a—a plant!"

Marshal Sam Nostrom dropped the weapon on the table. He had a hot .45 in his left hand, and he felt suddenly old and tired. He fingered the bloody welt across his neck, where Gipson's bullet had ricocheted from the table and nicked him, and stared at the dying man.

"Finally, you got caught with a bob-tail flush, Rut," he said wearily. "I figgered you'd jimmied the shells in that waist-gun. The way you carried it made it too plain you wanted yore victim to use it. I lifted it with my right hand deliberately. You see, Rut, there's more than one way to beat a high-dealer. You thought—"

The dying gambler coughed and blood spewed out of his mouth onto the sawdust.

"Go on, Sam," he muttered. "I'm—listening."

"Yes, Rut, you was smart. You watched my right hand, because you knew it had been slowed by the bullet in my spine. But you didn't think to spy on me and watch my daily practise with my left draw. I was takin' out insurance aga'inst the day I'd have to shoot it out with you."

Rut Gipson coughed again, feebly. Then he lay very still. Barney Smith, the swamper, left, grumbling, to bring the undertaker.

LONG SAM BLASTS THE BLASTER

The rifle's angry bark rang through the hills

By

LEE BOND

When a vicious desperado blows up his fifth stagecoach, Littlejohn goes on the hunt for some scheming hombres!

IT WAS like something from a horrifying dream, something so inhuman, so brutally cruel, that even the case-hardened nerves of Long Sam Littlejohn, outlaw, were unstrung. One moment the shiny, red-and-yellow stagecoach had been whizzing along the canyon floor, the six horses galloping eagerly towards Blue Bend and the feed and rest that waited them there. Then the stagecoach was whirling up into the air, pieces and parts of it flying like chaff in the wind! Dust and sand and clods of earth geysered up from the road, enveloping the terrible sight. But not until Long Sam Littlejohn had seen the stage guard and driver tossing about in the air like paper dolls, caught up by a devilish wind.

The sound came up the wooded slope to where Littlejohn sat his ugly old roan horse. It was the roaring, terrifying sound of dynamite. There had been an awful

charge of it, and now the echoes of its exploding went through the bright, Texas sunlight like evil thunder.

"The Blaster!" Long Sam Littlejohn croaked. "That dirty, murderin' hellion!"

He hopped off the ugly old roan horse he called Sleeper, every nerve in his gaunt tall body shaking from the thing he had just witnessed. He snaked a Winchester rifle from a saddle scabbard, smoke colored eyes watching the cloud of dust and sand settle slowly along the canyon below him.

He could hear the almost human screams of crippled and terrified horses, and noted that his hands were shaking as he levered a cartridge into the rifle's firing chamber. He left the gun cocked, flattened his tall length along the ground, and laid the rifle barrel over a mossy stone.

Three of the six horses that had been pulling the stage lunged out of the settling cloud of dust and stampeded south toward the towering green thickets that stretched from these hills to the Blue Bend of the Rio Grande. They were whinnying in terror and kicking at the ragged remnants of harness that still clung to them as they fled along the stage road.

But the other three horses that had been hooked to the stage would not flee. As the dust settled, Long Sam saw them lying strung along the road, one of them screaming and threshing in pain, the other two mercifully dead. The guard and driver were there in the road, too, sprawled and limp, unquestionably dead.

"Come on, Blaster!" Long Sam said to himself. "Sneak out of wherever you're hidin', and start searchin' that rubble for the strong box you want."

From boots to flat-crowned Stetson, Long Sam Littlejohn was dressed in jet black. Even the matched six-shooters that were thonged to his long thighs were nestled in black holsters, and had black grips. He lay moveless, knowing that he would be hard to see here in the shadows of the giant, moss-hung oaks he had halted beneath.

THIS was the fifth time within six months that a stage coach along this road that stretched from Pickett, far to the north in the rich hills country, down here to the Blue Bend terminus, had been blown to smithereens by dynamite. In each case there had been a heavy shipment of money aboard.

The whole Southwest was aroused over the crimes, and the mysterious bandit who set those awful death traps had been nicknamed the 'Blaster', for very obvious reasons. That these unspeakable crimes were the work of a lone bandit there was little doubt, for in each case there had been the boot-prints of a single man found in the smoothly settled sand and dust around the blast-torn coaches.

Long Sam was remembering that, when suddenly every nerve in him tightened. He strained his eyes to watch a faint movement at the edge of a thicket a good hundred yards up-canyon from the wrecked stage. A man stepped into view at the thicket's edge, a tall man who wore a long black slicker and had a dirty-white flour sack pulled down over his head.

There were eyelets cut in the sack, and the hooded head moved jerkily as the man looked up and down the canyon. Then he was running down the road toward the wrecked stage, and Long Sam Littlejohn's gun barrel swung slowly as he watched the murderous bandit.

The Blaster stopped at the road's edge, several yards short of where the twisted stage and the dead guard and driver lay. He bent over, hands making dust fly as he clawed at the dirt. Then he stood erect again working with two thin wires.

"So that's how you do it, you murderin' devil!" Long Sam thought.

He knew what those wires meant, of course. The Blaster simply picked a spot along this Blue Bend-Pickett road, planted a terrible charge of dynamite, then ran two thin wires three or four hundred feet back to some safe overhang or cave, and hooked the wires to a battery box. When the stage came along, the Blaster would wait until it was over his planted dynamite, then send a charge flashing down those wires to a fulminating cap.

The Blaster was taking in his wires now, rapidly forming them into a ball. When the wires were in, the Blaster shoved the ball into a slicker pocket. Then he turned to the wrecked stage. He stopped beside the first sprawled man he reached, prodded him sharply with a foot, went to the next man and repeated the action.

They were dead, as Long Sam had guessed, for the Blaster's hooded head bobbed in approval. He pulled something out of his slicker pocket and began unwrapping what Long Sam judged to be tissue paper from the way it fanned and fluttered in the breeze. The Blaster squatted beside the dead man he had prodded last, reached out, and placed something near the unmoving figure.

Long Sam rubbed his right hand along the side of his black sateen shirt, getting rid of the sweat that had made his palm and trigger finger slippery. The Blaster was on the move again, hopping through the scattered debris of the stage. He dived suddenly toward a clump of weeds, humped over, and began struggling with something heavy. When he straightened up he was hoisting an oblong green box to his right shoulder.

Long Sam Littlejohn began unconsciously humming a range dirge through big, bared teeth as he eased his finger back through the trigger guard and let it curl gently against the rifle trigger.

"Here's a blast for you, Blaster!" the gaunt outlaw said grimly.

When the rifle's angry bark rang through the hills, Long Sam got almost as much of a surprise as did the murderous Blaster. Long Sam was an expert marksman with any kind of gun, and knew when he gently squeezed the trigger that the hooded bandit down there should go heels-over-head, right leg broken half way between knee and ankle.

But nothing of the sort happened. Instead of breaking the Blaster's leg, the slug raised a long plume of dust as it skittered across the road a yard or more ahead of him. The Blaster stopped, rocking drunkenly. Then he was running faster than ever, for the whiplike crack of the rifle had reached his ears.

"What the blue, blazin' heck!" Long Sam growled when his second shot, like the first, went low and to the right.

THAT second slug really started the Blaster larruping, and Long Sam threw a third shot. When it went low and far to the right, as the other two had done, the gaunt Littlejohn knew that something was wrong with that gun. He levered the fourth cartridge into the firing chamber, guessed at the necessary correction, and squeezed the trigger again.

"Hot dog!" he grunted.

The Blaster went down as if he had been foot-roped, skidding on his face, the strong box tumbling out of his grasp. But the hooded murderer was up instantly, both hands clamped to his right side as he ran staggering to the thicket. Long Sam fired the last cartridge in his rifle, but the Blaster kept going.

"Of all the rotten luck!" Littlejohn growled as he jumped to his feet, remembering that he had no more cartridges for the Winchester.

The thicket the Blaster had dived into reached up the slope to heavy oak timber, such as Long Sam was standing under. He watched angrily while the Blaster flitted from the thicket to the timber lying flat along the neck of a powerful black horse that was running full tilt. Long Sam stared down at his rifle then, swearing in a harsh mutter of sound when he saw that the bead was bent, heeled over to one side.

"It probably bumped a rock or a bush hard enough to bend that sight through the scabbard," he grumbled. "Dad-blame the luck, if that gun had been workin' right—"

He broke off, shoved the rifle into the scabbard, and swung into Sleeper's saddle. His smoky eyes stabbed at the towering green wall of tornillo, pear and mesquite that lay beyond the hills. Out there to the south, maybe a mile away, was a camp of brush hackers, hewing a tunnel through those thorn-armored thickets that would some day be a good road running up-river from Blue Bend. The hackers would have heard that blast, and a roaring explosion such as that had been would tell them that the Blaster had been in action again.

"Come on, Sleeper!" Long Sam grumbled. "If I'm sighted around here, that cussed Joe Fry will be yellin' that I'm the Blaster!"

He sent Sleeper down the slope at a skidding run, smoky eyes grim as he saw how completely the stage had been wrecked. He glanced at the two dead men, shuddered, and was about to ride on when he saw something lying near one body that was as white and flashing as a small, powerful light.

Lying beside the stocky body of a

grizzled man who had died in that blast, was a horseshoe-shaped stickpin made of yellow gold and set with a dozen big, brilliant diamonds.

"Charlie French's famous lucky piece!" Long Sam said gravely. "So that's what the Blaster unwrapped and planted here."

He retrieved the stickpin without dismounting, blinked at it a moment, then shoved it into his pocket. He spun Sleeper, sent the roan up to where the strong box lay. It had broken open, and a heavy sack with a padlocked neck marked "Dalbert Stage and Freight Lines" was spilling out.

"Rattle them big hoofs, Sleeper!" he grunted. "I've got a hunch this diamond stickpin of Charlie French's will tell us who the Blaster is if we use it right!"

Long Sam rode back past the wreckage of the stage, a tense look about his face as he pulled the black-butted six-shooter from the holster at his right thigh. The big Colt roared once, and the crippled horse that had been threshing and whinnying grew as still as its two mates. Long Sam replaced the one spent shell, pushed the gun back into holster, and sent Sleeper out of the valley and into the towering green walls of thorn-armored brush.

But the gaunt outlaw was not following the stage road. He took the winding, narrow trails known to few men, working his way southward toward the Rio Grande. It was slow travel, and the sun had set, bringing dusk's first shadows when he reined in at the edge of the clearing where the town of Blue Bend sprawled along the bank of the Rio.

Blue Bend was a lot like a hornet's nest that had been hit with a rock. Men were buzzing everywhere, shouting in excitement and anger as they gathered saddled horses at the west end of the street.

The Blaster's latest crime had been discovered. Long Sam knew that as he leaned on the saddlehorn and watched from the protection of the heavy mesquite. Dusk was closing in fast, and yellow lamplights dappled the street.

When the thunder of churning hoofs told him that every man who could find a mount was setting out along the stage road, the gaunt outlaw moved away toward the big hacienda a few hundred yards to his right.

THAT beautiful house was the home of Charlie French, gambler, merchant, and swashbuckling adventurer, according to certain tales that were told. Long Sam grinned a little into the hot Texas night, remembering those tales that were told and re-told of the slim, genteel man's supposedly wild past. Charlie French had hired land cleared, and had built a trading post here on the banks of the Rio Grande twenty-odd years before. Blue Bend was Charlie French's town, lock, stock, and barrel.

Long Sam pulled in at a barn and corral that stood far to the rear of the huge, sprawling house. Inside the corral he heard a man grumbling, and saw a lantern bob jerkily as the man walked to the barn and went inside. The gaunt outlaw dismounted, eased the gate open, and let his roan through. He led his horse to the barn door, grinning as he peered in.

Charlie French was there in a stall, grumbling steadily as he measured grain into a feed box for a leggy colt that kept rooting and nipping at his arms. French was a slender man, immaculate in black frock coat, starched white shirt, gray trousers. His face was lean and well moulded, young looking in contrast with heavy hair that was almost snow-white. His brows were thin and flat, and as black as the keen eyes beneath them.

"Doin' your own barn chores, Charlie?" Long Sam asked drily.

"Yes, confound it!" French said testily. "My two stable boys lit out with my Morgan saddlers, but forgot to feed this colt. I should fire the rascally pair for such—Littlejohn!"

Charlie French's voice had ended in a sharp cry of surprise. Long Sam had led his horse inside, and was standing in the lantern's glow, studying the gray-haired, young-old gambler soberly.

"Sam, you idiot!" French groaned. "This town is wild howling for the blood of the Blaster. The devil blew up another coach this afternoon. If you're seen in Blue Bend, my bounty-plastered amigo, you will be shot on sight!"

"I'm not bein' accused of blowin' them stages up, am I?" Long Sam asked drily.

"Of course not," French retorted. "That is, you have not been positively named as the Blaster."

"How do you mean that, Charlie?" the

outlaw asked quickly.

"Joe Fry has been in town for the past week!" Charlie French said urgently. "Fry has not exactly accused you of being the Blaster, but he has said enough to let a lot of people know that he suspects you."

Long Sam swore in sudden anger. Joe Fry was a deputy U. S. marshal, working out of Austin. He wore button shoes, store suits and derby hats, and was generally chewing on a cigar. He looked and acted more like a cocky little drummer than the deadly, cold-nerved man hunter he was.

"That sawed-off squirt of a Fry better not start tellin' it around that I'm the murderin' Blaster!" Long Sam burst out.

"The thing for you to do is get on that ugly old roan and swim the river!" Charlie French said sharply. "Joe Fry took every man he could find a mount and went out the west road. Sam! That—that sack on your saddle. It says—"

Charlie French's voice trailed off in a hoarse gulp. His face got pale, and his black eyes widened slowly as he stared at the sack across Long Sam's saddle.

"It says 'Dalbert Stage and Freight Lines' on the side of the strong box," Long Sam said slowly. "I was watchin' when the Blaster blew that stage up this afternoon, Charlie."

He explained fully, watching excitement grow in the eyes of Charlie French. Long Sam slipped his hand in his pocket and pulled out the diamond-studded stickpin the Blaster had left beside one of his victims at the scene of the stage tragedy. He kept the stickpin hidden in his hand.

"You kept that murderous devil from getting the loot off that stage!" Charlie French cried. "And you wounded him. What did he look like? Did you know him, Sam?"

"One of my slugs nicked the Blaster in the right side, judgin' from the way he acted," Long Sam said soberly. "He dropped the strong box, and made his getaway. He had on a slicker and that flour sack hood, as I've told you. He was medium tall, but I couldn't tell anything about his weight or build, because of the slicker. And he got out of there too fast for that slug to have done much more than burn his hide a little."

"But at least we've got something to work on!" French cried. "By asking questions of doctors up and down the river, peace officers may learn the name of some fellow who had to have a bullet wound in his right side taken care of. If— Where did you get that?"

CHARLIE FRENCH'S voice was a thin yelp of excitement as he saw the blazing pin in Long Sam's out-thrust hand. The gambler grinned, reached out, and took it eagerly. But his grin vanished, and the pin fell from his suddenly shaking hands as Long Sam told him where he had got hold of the stickpin.

"The Blaster?" French gulped. "He had this pin of mine, and left it out there beside the body of Stub Deever or Buck Stimpson?"

"The Blaster took this out of his pocket, unrolled tissue paper he had around it, and put it beside the body of a stocky, grizzled man who had been killed when the stage was blown up," Long Sam said grimly. "The other man who was killed was a lanky, sandy-haired fellow, somewhere around his mid-thirties, I'd judge."

Long Sam bent over, retrieved the diamond pin, and handed it to French, who shuddered a little at the feel of it in his hands.

"Stub Deever was the stocky, grizzled fellow," the gambler said hoarsely. "He was the stagedriver. The lanky red-head was Buck Stimpson, shotgun guard. But why was my stickpin left out there beside Deever's body? It doesn't make sense, that I can see."

"I did a lot of thinkin' about that, on the way to town," Long Sam said soberly. "Charlie, how many people actually know the truth about you?"

"The—the truth about me?" French stammered uneasily.

"You know what I mean!" Long Sam grunted. "When you started a trading post that grew into this town, Charlie, you were an Iowa school teacher, out huntin' adventure. Old Comanche Brock, a broken-down Indian fighter, scout, and trapper, took a likin' to you and told tall tales with you as the gun-slingin' hero. Brock did that to keep the hard-case gents who ride this Border from runnin' over you. But how many people have you ever told the truth to about your past?"

"Sam, you're the only man I've ever told anything about my past," French groaned.

"And the way you bedevil me at times, makes me wish I had never told you a thing. Brock was such a helpful and lovable old rake that I hadn't the heart to give his tall tales the lie.

"People still whisper about me, say that I'm an ex-outlaw, gun-fighter, smuggler, and heaven only knows what. But you're the only living person, now that Comanche is dead, who actually knows that I never shot at a human being in my life."

"I see," Long Sam said soberly.

He stalled and fed Sleeper, while Charlie French argued almost angrily that the thing for him to do was get to the Mexican side of the Rio Grande as fast as possible.

"Blow out your lantern, and lead the way to the house, Charlie," Long Sam said gravely. "Sure, headin' for Mexico while I have the chance would be the smart thing for me to do. But you're one of the few people I can trust as a friend, and you're in a tight. I'm not runnin' out on you, so quit arguin' and get that lantern put out before somebody sights us with this strong box."

French blew the lantern out, a startled tone in his voice as he asked what Long Sam meant by saying that he was in a tight.

"The Blaster meant for you to be arrested, charged with his crimes," Long Sam said bluntly. "Every man, woman and child in this country knows that famous diamond stickpin of yours. The Blaster left it out there, knowin' whoever saw it would recognize it, and that you would be arrested. What I'd like to know is how the Blaster got hold of that stickpin."

"So would I like to know how that devil got hold of this stickpin!" French said worriedly.

"How long has it been missin'?" Long Sam asked as they walked rapidly across the corral.

"But the pin hasn't been missing," French said sharply. "At least, Sam, I was unaware that it was missing."

THE gambler moved ahead, swung the corral gate open until Long Sam stepped outside, then closed and fastened the gate again.

"When did you see that pin last?" the gaunt outlaw asked as they moved towards the fine house.

"Last night," Charlie French replied promptly. "Or, rather, early this morning. I sat in a stud game until daylight. Around three o'clock this morning, I grew so tired and warm I took my coat off and removed my tie, too. I hung my coat over the back of my chair, folded the necktie and stuck it in one of the coat pockets. The stickpin was fastened to the tie."

"Where was that poker game, and who was in it besides you?" Littlejohn asked quickly.

"The game was at my Border Palace, of course," French told him. "But neither of the three men with whom I played took that stickpin, Sam."

"Why are you so sure about the men you played stud with?" the gaunt outlaw wanted to know.

"The men I played with were Stan Dalbert, Dick Hillard and Ike Tull," Charlie French said quietly.

"Dalbert?" Long Sam probed. "He part of this Dalbert Stage and Freight Company that owns this sack I'm luggin'?"

"Stan Dalbert is the company," the gambler said firmly.

"How about the other two, Dick Hillard and Ike Tull?" Long Sam probed.

"They work for Stan Dalbert, and have ever since he started his stage and freight line," French replied. "Certainly Stan Dalbert and his two most trusted men wouldn't have done it. Whoever took that pin was either the Blaster, or a friend of his."

"Obviously," Long Sam said drily. "But who else had a chance to borrow that diamond pin of yores, Charlie?"

"Any of a couple of hundred men could have taken the pin," French sighed. "Dalbert, Hillard, Tull and I played poker at a table near the back of the main room at my Border Palace. It was a fairly stiff game, and men bunched around us constantly, watching."

"Oh, fine!" Long Sam groaned. "All we have to do is round up and question a couple of hundred hombres who were millin' around your table last night. With a little luck, we might get the chore done in six months! By that time— Whoa!"

Long Sam's voice ended on a low, quick note. He and Charlie French had come to the back wall of the big patio behind the gambler's house. Looking over the breast-high adobe wall, Long Sam had seen the back door open, and saw three

men coming out into the patio.

"Stan Dalbert and his two men, Dick Hillard and Ike Tull," Charlie French said tensely. "Sam, you mustn't let them see you here with that sack."

"They're comin' this way," Long Sam whispered. "I'll hunker down outside the wall here, and keep quiet. You haven't seen me, don't know anything about your stickpin bein' missin', or me havin' this strong box."

"Don't worry," French said softly.

He waited until the three men were within a few paces of him, then scuffed his feet, rattled the patio gate latch, and went inside. Long Sam, hat off and peering cautiously over the top of the patio wall, saw the three men halt abruptly.

"Hello!" French called out. "Who are you fellows?"

"It's me, French!" a gruff voice replied. "Dick and Ike are with me."

"Hello, Stan," French said evenly. "I heard, of course, about the Blaster striking again. I'm mighty sorry."

"Yeah?" Stan Dalbert's gruff voice was harsh. "You're sorry about my stages gettin' blowed up, and the guards and drivers killed, you say. But if that's so, why have you been harborin' the Blaster?"

"What do you mean by such a charge as that, Stan?" Charlie French asked sharply.

"Don't go gettin' no notions, Mister Gamblin' Man!" a thin, cold voice said. "Make a play for a gun, and you'll git hurt."

"What's the matter with you, Ike Tull?" French asked angrily. "I'm making no move to pull a gun on you fellows."

"Dick and Ike rode out to where the Blaster got that stage with Joe Fry's posse," Stan Dalbert's voice came angrily. "While Fry and the others was millin' around, Dick noticed a piece of paper clutched in the right hand of Stub Deever, the dead stage driver. Stub had lived long enough to write a note on a page of that little tally book he always carried, French."

"So?" Charlie French droned, and Long Sam could tell that the gambler was tensely on guard.

"I've got that note in my pocket, French!" Stan Dalbert rasped. "It says

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'Long Sam Littlejohn is Blaster. I seen him come out of brush and get sack from strong box.' Dick pushed that note in his pocket without lettin' Joe Fry or anybody else see it."

"Why didn't you give the note to Fry, Dick?" Charlie French asked almost softly.

"I figgered Stan ought to see it first," a deep-toned voice replied. "The whole town knows that you let Long Sam Littlejohn hang out here at yore place, any time the hellion wants to. So I figgered it was up to Stan to say whether we set Joe Fry onto you or not."

"Come along to the house, French!" Stan Dalbert said coldly. "We'll have us another talk about them places I've been wantin' to open here in this town you're hoggin'. Joe Fry will shore give you trouble if he sees this note. He knows you've been lettin' Littlejohn hang around here, and is already sore at yuh for that. But maybe Fry will never see this note. It all depends on whether or not I get to open them two saloons and the dancehall I've been talkin' to you about."

LONG SAM LITTLEJOHN was softly humming a range dirge, smoky eyes slitted and hard as he watched the four men walk across the patio and enter the back door. And anyone who knew the gaunt outlaw even passably well would have realized that he was fighting mad, for he always hummed that dismal tune when his temper hit the boiling point. He shouldered the sack and let himself through the patio gate, still humming softly as he quartered along the rear wall of the rambling house he knew well.

Long Sam found the window he wanted, swung the hinged screen back, and lowered the sack gently over the sill, letting it down on the thick carpeting of a hallway that ran toward the front of the house. He lifted himself over the sill cautiously, sharp eyes on lighted arches far down the hall on his right. He took up the strong box and went toward the two archways, the softly hummed dirge dying on his lips as he advanced.

Those two archways led into the vast, richly furnished living room, and Long Sam could hear angry voices coming out to him as he halted near the swath of lamplight that spilled into the hallway.

"You're trying to blackmail me, Stan!" Charlie French was saying angrily. "Frankly, I think this whole thing is a hoax. I don't believe Dick Hillard found that note in Stub Deever's hand."

Long Sam took off his hat, peered cautiously around the edge of the plastered archway. Charlie French was well down the room, facing a tall, well-dressed man who had black hair, craggy features that looked red with anger, and hard gray eyes that were cold and alert.

"So you think I'm bluffin', do you?" the tall man mocked.

"I certainly do, Stan!" French snapped. "I think you're trying to frighten me into letting you open up dives and honky-tonks here in Blue Bend—something I've never permitted to operate in this town."

"Have it your way." Stan Dalbert shrugged big shoulders. "I'll turn the note over to Joe Fry."

Long Sam glanced at the other two men who were there in the room. They were standing off to one side, watching and listening as Stan Dalbert and Charlie French talked. One of them was a burly, red-faced fellow, with curly brown hair and sharp blue eyes. The other was lanky, hatchet-faced, and had squinty green eyes that batted constantly. That tough-looking pair would be Dick Hillard and Ike Tull, Long Sam knew, and noted that they each wore two six-shooters in tied-down holsters.

"You haven't seen your pal, Long Sam Littlejohn, anytime today, have yuh, French?" the burly, red-faced man asked.

"Why do you ask that, Hillard?" French shot the question sharply.

Dick Hillard scowled, chewed a thick lip, and glanced a little uneasily at Stan Dalbert, who had sworn sharply.

"Looks like we better go, fellers!" Ike Tull, the bony, green-eyed fellow, said. "Fry and that posse will be gettin' back any time, now. Reckon we'll have to let Fry handle this French cuss."

"Harborin' a criminal is a serious offense," Dick Hillard said. "If Joe Fry gets a look at this note, he'll shore crack down on yuh, French."

"Long Sam Littlejohn is no criminal!" French snapped. "I happen to know that he's not a thief, regardless of what Joe Fry and a few other mistaken peace officers say bout him."

"Tell that to Joe Fry!" Ike Tull sneered. "Yuh heard Stan's offer. Turn over them three buildin's he wants for saloons and the dancehall, and we'll forget to mention this note to Joe Fry. Keep on bein' stiff-necked, and— Look out, fellers!"

Ike Tull's voice went up to a screech of alarm. Long Sam Littlejohn had stepped into the living room, hat pulled low over smoky eyes, the sack hung over his right shoulder.

"Littlejohn!" Stan Dalbert and Dick Hillard bawled in the same startled breath.

Ike Tull had a six-shooter in each bony fist, and was blinking like a hail-pelted toad. Stan Dalbert and Dick Hillard pulled guns, too. But, like Ike Tull, they seemed too flabbergasted by Long Sam's calm manner to use the weapons they held.

"Why all the hardware, gents?" the gaunt outlaw asked calmly.

HE PACED down the room until he was within a few feet of the gun muzzles pointing at him, then stopped. He shifted the strong box on his shoulder, but made no effort to put it down.

"Sam, you idiot!" Charlie French groaned. "Why in the name of sense did you come in here?"

"I wanted to see the pretty winged hosses, for one thing," Long Sam droned.

"Winged hosses?" Stan Dalbert growled. "What do you mean by a locoed thing like that, Littlejohn?"

"I was scrooched down outside the patio wall when you and these other two met Charlie outside, a while ago, Dalbert," Long Sam told him with a cold smile. "I heard you claim Hillard and Tull rode out with Joe Fry to where the stage was wrecked, got a note out of the dead driver's hand, and come back here. When you made that statement, Fry and the posse had been gone from town maybe thirty minutes. It's five or six miles out to where that stage was wrecked. No hoss I've even seen could do ten or twelve miles travelin' in thirty minutes. So Tull and Hillard must have winged broncs, and I thought I'd drop in to see the critters."

"Don't get lippy, you meddlin', sneakin' hellion!" Stan Dalbert growled. "Or had you noticed that you're lookin' into the wrong end of five pistols?"

[*Turn page*]

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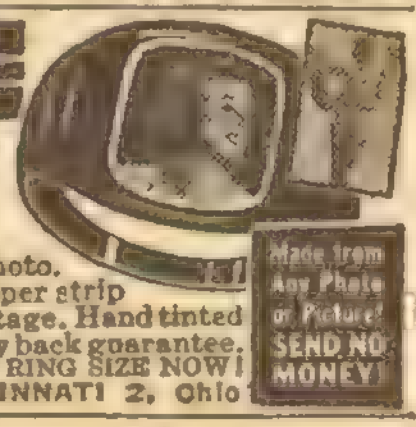

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"I noticed the guns," Long Sam droned. "But I reckon you boys won't cut me down right away."

"What makes you think we won't blast you?" Dalbert snapped.

"You're too buzzin' curious to know whether or not I recognized the Blaster, and who I've told about it, if I did," Long Sam countered.

Stan Dalbert's face tensed, and white patches appeared at the outside corners of his mouth.

"I was out yonder today when that stage was blown up," Long Sam said soberly. "I saw it happen, and saw that sneakin', yellow-bellied coward of a Blaster slip out of the brush, coil up the wires he used to set off the blast. I watched the Blaster plant Charlie French's famous diamond stickpin beside the dead driver, then gather up this strong box I'm luggin', and start away."

"You'd know the Blaster if yuh seen him again?" Dick Hillard asked slowly.

"He had on a flour sack mask and a slicker," Long Sam said calmly. "So I wouldn't recognize the Blaster, since I couldn't see his face, and couldn't tell too much about his shape and size because of the slicker."

"After accidentally catchin' the Blaster in action, you didn't try to stop him, I reckon?" Stan Dalbert asked gruffly.

"My bein' there wasn't an accident," Long Sam replied. "And I did try to stop the Blaster. The bead on my rifle was bent, or the Blaster would have been Boothill bound. But he dropped this strong box, which I fetched in, aimin' to have Charlie, there, turn it over to its rightful owner."

"What do you mean, your bein' out there wasn't an accident?" Dalbert asked sharply.

"Me and a feller named Bob Walker have ridden guard on every stage that has run between here and Pickett for the past three weeks," Long Sam said soberly. "We split the ride at the half-way house on Panther Creek, Bob workin' between there and Pickett, while I work this end of the run. You've maybe seen Bob Walker around town now and then. He's a big, red-headed feller. Bob's a corporal in the Texas Rangers."

"Stan, we better do somethin', and do it quick!" Ike Tull said shrilly. "I know

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that Bob Walker hellion. If he's nosin' around, there'll be heck to pay."

"We've got us a deal here, Stan!" Dick Hillard rumbled. "Littlejohn fetched that strong box along with him real accommodatin'. Now if him and French was to get shot up bad, and the money outa that box was sorta found scattered around in this room, we could say we caught 'em dividin' up the loot and had to use our guns to tame 'em."

"Stan, what's got into you and these two men of yours?" Charlie French cried. "Littlejohn has returned stolen property to you. Why are you and your two men acting as if you hated him for it?"

Stan Dalbert's face was white, and there was something in his glittering eyes that suggested fear. He licked his lips, then tried to grin.

"Dick and Ike and me are upset, that's all," he said hoarsely. "Gettin' that note Stub Deever wrote namin' Littlejohn as the Blaster, made us jumpy, I reckon. But Stub must have been mistaken. Littlejohn fetched the sack in, so I reckon he ain't the bandit, after all."

He holstered his gun as he spoke, turn-

[*Turn page*]

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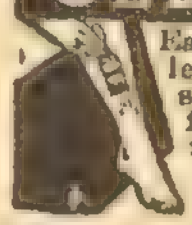

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ing to look at his two companions, who were gaping at him.

"Holster the hardware, boys," he said smoothly. "With Ranger Bob Walker knowin' Littlejohn ain't the Blaster, I reckon we're satisfied, eh? And don't ary one of you fools josh any more about shootin' Littlejohn and French. They might think you meant fool talk like that. Get them guns in leather!"

THE last sentence was spoken in a tone of stern command. Dick Hillard and Ike Tull turned a little pale, walled their eyes at Long Sam, and reluctantly holstered their weapons. The gaunt outlaw heaved a sigh of relief, put the sack down on the floor, and sleeved sweat off his face.

That had been a close call, and Long Sam's nerves felt like thin, hot wires, being dragged through his flesh. He began humming a doleful range dirge through big, white teeth, smoky eyes staring coldly at Stan Dalbert.

"Hello, Blaster!" Long Sam's words crackled harshly through the startled silence his humming had caused.

"Me?" Stan Dalbert howled. "You crane-legged, meddlin' fool, why would I blow up and rob my own stages?"

Long Sam had no chance to reply. Thinking his attention was wholly on their boss, Dick Hillard and Ike Tull went for their guns, fear twisting their faces. They were on Long Sam's left, and no doubt considered that an advantage, too, since a right-handed man would have to pull his gun, swing it, and fire across his own body.

But Ike Tull and Dick Hillard were in for a painful surprise. Ambidextrous from childhood, Long Sam Littlejohn could write, throw, rope, shave his face or shoot a gun as handily with one hand as the other. Ike Tull's guns were out, muzzles tilting up for a deadly, close range shot, when flame and smoke thundered out from Long Sam's left hip level. Ike Tull fell screaming shrilly, both cheeks ripped open and most of his nose torn away by a .45 slug.

Long Sam was humming again, and suddenly the gun was out of his right holster, blasting in unison with the pistol in his left hand. Big Dick Hillard sent a brace of slugs into Charlie French's fine rug,

but was too dead to know it.

Long Sam started to pivot slightly, and the pivoting motion became a whirling fall that sent him rolling over the floor, pain hammering at his right side in red waves. He saw Stan Dalbert rushing at him, face satanic in rage and murderous elation as he leveled a smoking gun for another shot.

Charlie French sailed into big Stan Dalbert, trying to slap him across the head with a fancy, gold-inlaid six shooter. Stan Dalbert swore savagely, kicked Charlie French in the midriff, then whirled back to face Long Sam again.

But, brief as the interruption had been, Charlie French had distracted Stan Dalbert long enough to give Long Sam a chance to get his bearings. The gaunt outlaw's six-shooters speared flame-tipped thunder up from the floor, and Stan Dalbert's twisted face caught both crushing slugs. Dalbert lurched, lost his footing, and came down hard, the six-shooter spilling from his lifeless hand.

Long Sam got on his feet, shaking from shock and pain as he reloaded hot guns and holstered them. He pulled open his shirt, clucked ruefully at the deep, bleeding gash across his right ribs, then buttoned the shirt again.

CHARLIE FRENCH was getting up, white and sick from the savage blow of Dalbert's boot toe. He staggered over and watched while Long Sam rolled Ike Tull over, wrenched a gun out of the sobbing, bloody-faced tough's right hand.

"Sam, are you sure?" Charlie French panted. "Is it possible that Stan Dalbert is the Blaster, robbing his own stages and murdering men who worked for him?"

"Dalbert was the Blaster," Long Sam said pointedly, nodding toward the lifeless hulk.

"But why did he do such horrible things?"

"Charlie, when that famous River Road reaches Blue Bend, this town will boom, grow by leaps and bounds," Long Sam said slowly. "You and every other man here will prosper. But Dalbert wouldn't have prospered. The minute that River Road is completed, a big stage and freight company is set to roll down here from Rocky Point. Stan Dalbert's Blue Bend-Pickett line would be finished."

[*Turn page*]

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"My heavens, I hadn't thought of that!" French said, startled.

"Stan Dalbert had," Long Sam droned. "That's why he tried to get a toe-hold here with honky-tonks and other sucker traps. When you wouldn't let him have space for his dive, he started figurin' ways to get rid of you. When his stage and freight line folded up, he wanted to be in on the boom with honky-tonks and crooked gamblin' dens that would have made him a fortune in no time."

"That's why he stole my stickpin and left it out there at the wrecked stage today!" French said heavily. "Stan wanted me arrested, gotten out of his way. That is, if he really is—er—was the Blaster."

Long Sam walked over to Stan Dalbert's body, pulled out the shirt tail, and heard Charlie French gasp when they saw a tight bandage over the dead man's right hip. Long Sam jerked the bandage off, exposing a long, shallow gash in the flesh.

"He was the Blaster!" French said unsteadily. "That gash is where your bullet nicked him, this afternoon. But how did you ever come to suspect him, Sam?"

"I suspected that Dalbert, Hillard or Tull, one, got that stickpin of yours, when you told me about that poker game you sat in last night," Long Sam said evenly. "Then Dalbert and his two pals came here lyin' about that note they claimed the stagedriver wrote before he died. When Dick Hillard wanted to kill you and me, and make it look like we had been dividin' up this loot, I knew I had the Blaster where I could blast him, if I worked it right."

"The insurance company that has had to make up the four other losses on Dalbert's stages has offered a nice reward for the Blaster, Sam," French said. "If we can just convince them that Dalbert was the Blaster, you'll be well paid for the risks you ran bringing him to justice."

LONG SAM winked at Charlie French. "Oh, Dick Hillard and Ike Tull were in on the blastin' of those stages, too," he said. "Dalbert and Hillard are both dead, I see. But Tull is alive. A sawbones can patch him up for a court to hang. Or likely a mob will get him before he ever comes to trial."

"That's a pack of lies!" Ike Tull

shrieked. "Dick Hillard and me didn't even know Dalbert was the Blaster until he come in today, cussin' you and hollerin' for us to patch up his side, Littlejohn. Dick and me heard enough to know that Dalbert was the Blaster before he realized he was talkin' too much."

"Baloney!" Long Sam grunted. "You and Dick Hillard were plenty willin' to help murder me and Charlie French, so you two have been in on this stage blastin' business, all along."

"We wasn't neither!" Tull whined. "Me and Dick put the screws on Dalbert after we got wise, this afternoon. We made him take us in as full partners. We aimed to use the money Dalbert got by robbin' them other four stages to open up a saloon here in town, soon as we could get that fool French knocked into line."

"Testimony like that might save your dirty neck from the hangman's noose," Long Sam said coldly. "So you better talk when the time comes, Tull, and talk straight."

"Of course I'll talk!" Tull whimpered. "I'll tell all I know, and show the law where all that loot Dalbert got is hid. But get a sawbones before I bleed to death!"

"Sam, where are you going?" Charlie French yelped uneasily as Long Sam moved rapidly toward the archways.

"I hear a lot of whoopin' and hollerin' out in town, Charlie," Sam said. "Fry and his posse are evidently back. The shootin' here was bound to have been heard, and someone will tell Fry about it. I'm gettin' that Sleeper hoss of mine and headin' for the yonder bank of the Rio before that runt of a Joe Fry gets sight of me. Adios, amigo!"

Long Sam vanished into the hallway, the sound of his rapid strides muffled by the thick carpeting as he ran down the hall to the window through which he had climbed earlier.

"If that Littlejohn hellion is so chummy with Bob Walker, the Texas Ranger, howcome he's so scairt of Joe Fry and other badge polishers?" Ike Tull asked groggily.

"Littlejohn saved Bob Walker's life, a few years ago, and they have been the best of friends ever since," Charlie French said gravely. "Some day, Joe Fry and other officers may realize what a

[*Turn page*]

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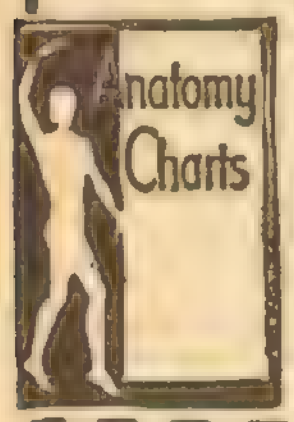

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mistake they are making in thinking Long Sam Littlejohn is actually a crook. I sincerely hope it will be that way, anyhow.

"Lie still, Tull, and let's see what I can do about that wound of yours. I want you to live, mostly because I want Joe Fry to know what a fool he made of himself by hinting around that Long Sam might be the Blaster."

THE FRONTIER POST

(Continued from page 8)

Of all the handies enjoyed by present-day outdoorsmen, I'd say that the air mattress sleeping bag tops the list. It used to be that the uncertainty of a good night's sleep took more joy out of a camping trip than anything else. I've traveled far with only one blanket and a poncho cloth—hoping to find hay or grass or leaves to bed down on when night came.

But often as not the campground was bare and hard—and sometimes mighty cold. I've slept—or tried to sleep—with two campfires, one close on each side of me, and then piled out with my soogans white with frost at daylight.

Nowadays, a sleeping bag of down, feathers or wool, covered with light, water repellent material, can be carried on a saddle cantle and handled under one arm. It's snug down to freezing temperature.

It's surprising how little air is needed in a blow-up mattress. Mine takes about 50 puffs, like inflating a toy balloon. Over 50, it's too bouncy. Just enough air to keep hip bones from thumping on the ground when you turn over, that's all that's needed.

Another thing I've found out in my sleeping bag *pasears* is that when the air imprisoned in the mattress warms up, it expands. The mattress swells and gets harder. It's simple to reach for the valve, let a little air sizzle out, then close it with a twist.

It's more comfortable than most home beds and zippers up the sides, keeping out night-crawling varmints, stray breezes and sidewinders in search of a cozy place to settle down and raise a family.

Texas Rangers in the old days would have paid any price for such comfort. Of course, an outlaw's bullet or a cactus sticker could put an air mattress on the bum real sudden.

I'm not as enthusiastic about air pillows. Mine always skids out from under my ear

sometime during the night. I'm figuring on some way to tie it on, like an old-fashioned sun bonnet.

Saddles Haven't Changed

An inventor *amigo* of mine, is working on an air cushioned saddle, made specially for dude riders. He's bucking a tough proposition, seems to me. One thing that hasn't changed in years is the Western saddle, one reason being that hosses are the same shape they've always been. And a saddle is made, first of all, to fit the critter, then the rider.

Among the new-fangled outdoor devices you see and read about are waterproof matches and various contrivances for starting a campfire in wet weather. But for carrying matches dry, I've never seen anything yet that beats an empty 16-gauge shotgun shell slipped into a 12-gauge empty. As for kindling an ornery fire, there's nothing better than a stub of an ordinary candle. But be sure and pack it where it won't melt in hot weather, to saturate your duffle with paraffin grease.

It's surprising how little a camper-out needs to be comfortable. It's equally surprising how uncomfortable you can be from lugging along too much of what's not needed. Tin-can cookery is an art. You don't need a clattery set of pots and pans when roughing it. A fold-handle frying pan is the only indispensable. A coffee pot is nice to have but you can make the finest coffee in the land in an old tomato can.

The trick in making good camp coffee is to wait till the water starts to sizzle around the sides before putting in the "jimokey." Use a heaping tablespoon to the cup. Take it from the fire when it boils. Stir thoroughly, then drop in a hot ember from the campfire. That makes the coffee clear.

If you let your coffee stand on the grounds, drop in some more charred wood. It takes away the bitterness.

The final touch in making perfect coffee is knowing just how long it should boil. Around sea level, a 10-second boil does it. As altitude increases, it must boil longer to get the strength. Boiling temperature drops about two degrees with every 1000 feet of ascent. That means at 5000 feet, boiling temperature is about 202 degrees. That calls for a 30-second boil.

Skillet grease and campfire ashes make soap. It isn't the fanciest, suds-making soap

[*Turn page*]

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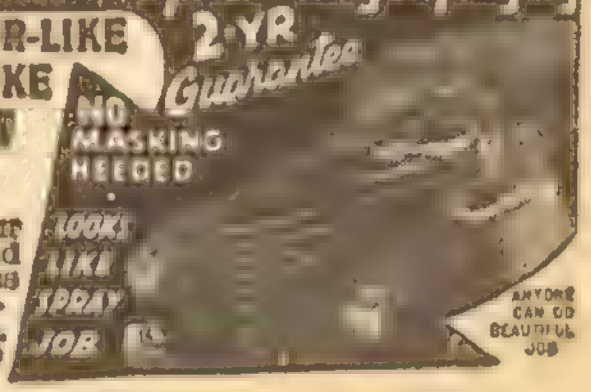

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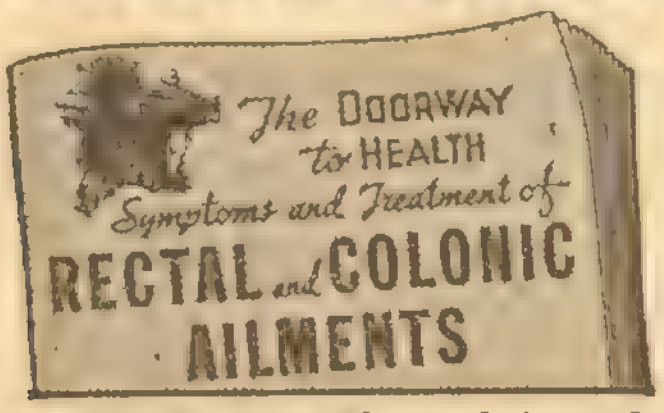

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you ever used. But it scours and gets things clean. A pad of dry moss makes a perfect dishrag. There's nothing more bothersome to pack than a soggy cloth dishrag. To keep anything cool, wrap it in dry newspaper, then a layer of wet newspaper. In the old days, we kept fish and game a long time by hanging it at night, then wrapping it thataway and then rolling it up inside a woolen blanket or two. It kept cold through a long, hot day, till come night and time to hang and chill it again.

You can broil the finest steak you ever ate over a campfire on nothing more elaborate than two squares of coarse screen, with a half-inch mesh. Put the steak between the two squares, wire 'em together at the edges if the steak is a thick, heavy one, then lay it in stout, green sticks laid across rocks, over the glowing embers of your fire. Turn it once. Season it when done, not before. Salt makes the juice escape.

If you've plumb got to be fancy, you can use a two-bit cookie sheet for a combination stovetop and skillet. Pack it in a paper bag so the grime doesn't rub onto everything. You can turn out a good job of flapjacks on a cookie sheet, too.

What most camp pilgrims miss is a bath. It's easy to rig a camp shower. Punch holes in the bottom of a gallon-sized can with a box nail. Hang it from a limb. Peel off, dump in your warm water and go to work. If your nail holes aren't too big, a gallon of warm water will do a complete job. Privacy, of course, is something to arrange according to your surroundings. What I'm thinking of is lonely country, away from everybody.

I've fancy-duded and gone light, with all the variations in between. But for downright camp enjoyment, I'll take mine Injun-simple. Folks of plain taste and modest pocketbooks can tour from Texas westward for surprisingly little money, with a pack including sleeping bag that weighs no more than 50 pounds and costs even less in dollars. If you gals and galluses tackle such a trip, write in and tell me about it!

—CAPTAIN STARR.

NEXT MONTH'S ISSUE

FEW men in current fiction have made so strong an appeal to readers everywhere as Jim Hatfield. The tall Texas Ranger, pure gold to his friends and unadulterated poison to bad men, was the Nemesis of the cold, sinister, dangerous hom-

bres who rode the dark trails of the Southwest.

Danger was the very wine of life to Jim Hatfield. He thrived on it, and was never happy without it. And if it was danger he wanted, and the thrill of combat with powerful, unscrupulous enemies, then he could hardly have picked a better spot than Tascosa, in the Panhandle, during the time of the big cowboy strike against the ranch owners. *That* was a ruckus with no holds barred—a knockdown-and-drag-out affair which grew bloodier and more terrible as it neared its climax.

Jim Hatfield was right in the middle of it, and Jackson Cole has the whole thrilling story down for your reading pleasure in THE STARLIGHT RIDERS—the exciting novel coming up in the next issue of TEXAS RANGERS.

Cliff Archer was one of the ranchers who stood out against the demands of the organized punchers for better wages and working conditions. And so, on a black night with forked lightning building up its threat of storm in the west, a bunch of riders ganged Cliff Archer, killed him and burned all the ranch buildings.

That fire was the signal. It was as if somebody had heaved up the trapdoor of Hades, letting out flame and smoke along with a lot of devils to run wild in the Tascosa country.

Who had done the Archer thing? The cowboys? Most folks didn't know for sure. But it was right on the heels of the fire that Hatfield, coming from the south, crossed the South Canadian at the old Tascosa ford and, on his big horse, Goldy, entered the fight.

We say entered the fight because Hatfield had just finished helping old Dad Lake and his pretty granddaughter Norma with their mired-down wagon when three riders bore down on him with blood in their eyes. Now let the author tell it. Here's a quotation from the story:

> The three riders swept forward and pulled up a score of paces distant. Foremost was a big, burly man with a beefy face and a truculent eye, his brows drawn together in a scowl. He stared at the tall horseman, and his voice rang out, harsh, peremptory:
>
> "Feller, we don't hanker for strangers in this section."
>
> "That so?" the tall man replied mildly.
>
> "Yeah, that's so," the other growled.

[*Turn page*]

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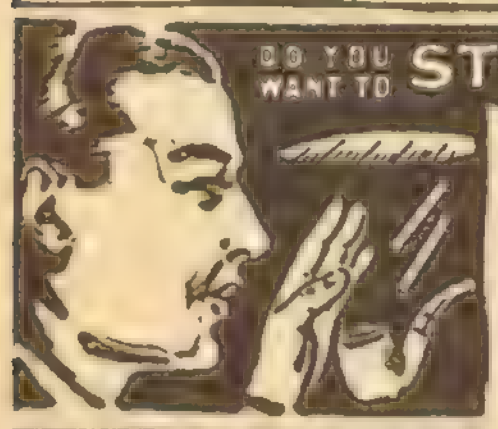

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"Too bad," the tall man returned, "'cause folks sometimes get what they don't hanker for."

The other's heavy face darkened. His hard mouth set like a trap.

"You fork that yaller hoss, turn him around and get back across that river," he ordered.

"That horse allus goes the way he's headed," the tall man replied, "and right now he's headed for town."

The big rider's jaw dropped slightly. And then—

The old wagoner, Dad Lake, later regaled a group in the Equity saloon with a description of what happened.

"Never seed nothin' like it," he declared. "Buck Johnson, who was doin' the big talkin', let out a beller and yanked his gun. Then he nigh went out of his hull like his bronc had swallered his head. His gun landed in the dirt about twenty feet off, its lock all smashed to the devil.

"And there was Buck, ravin' and cussin' and pawin' at his right hand what had a chunk of meat knocked out of it as big as my nose. The two fellers with him—Cantrel and Hardy—just sat there like they was turned to wood blocks, grippin' the handles of their guns and scairt to turn loose of 'em.

"And the big feller was just standin' lookin' at 'em over the sights of a couple of hawglegs about two foot long that had just natcherly growed in his hands. I'm plumb ready to swear there waren't no gun in his hand when Buck cleared leather. Them guns just happened. Yeah, there he was standin', lookin' over the barrels of them guns, one of 'em wispin' smoke.

"And them eyes of his! Gentlemen, hush! I never seed eyes like them. When he was talkin' to me they was green like the water in a shady creek with the sun filterin' down through the leaves. All warm and sunny they was.

"But lookin' at Buck and his two backers, they was like the Canadian when she's froze over and a north wind is siftin' snow across the ice. They'd plumb changed color and just lookin' at 'em made me cold all over. Then he said just two words. Just two words!"

"What was them words, Dad Lake?"

"'Get goin'!' And them three—they *got* goin'!"

And then, of course, Jim Hatfield went on into Tascosa with Dad Lake and Norma. What a place, Tascosa! "The cowboy capital of the plains!" The wildest, wooliest, toughest town the Old West ever knew!

Jackson Cole tells how it was on that important night just before Hatfield's arrival—that storm-filled night when the raiders wiped out Cliff Archer.

Late as was the hour, and despite the roaring wind and the intermittent gusts of rain, the board sidewalks were crowded with a whooping, arguing, singing throng that flowed in and out of the saloons and gambling houses. The windows which during the day were purplish staring eyes had changed to squares and rectangles of gold.

The spears of rain glittered in the bars of light that streamed over the tops of the swinging doors. From inside came the solid thump of boots and the sprightly click of high heels on the dance floors, the strumming of guitars and the whining of fiddles. Bottle necks clinked on glass rims, gold pieces rang and clattered on the mahogany, roulette wheels hummed, dice tumbled across the green cloth, cards slithered together with a silky rustling. The monotonous voices of dealers and table men sounded through the uproar:

"Place yore bets, gents, place yore bets. Double O wins again. Pay off on the black. Here they come, gents, aces showin'! Bets ten. Sixes showin' calls. Here they come!"

Along the sidewalks the crowd ebbed and flowed. Mud, churned to a fluid paste by horses' hoofs and the wheels of wagons, was fetlock deep in the streets. Lanterns hung on poles were blobs of molten brass swinging free in the rain mist and casting a lurid flicker over the scene. There was a smell of horseflesh, wet leather, damp sawdust and newly sawed lumber.

Ranker was the whiff of spilled whisky, tobacco smoke and sweat.

Tascosa was having one of its habitual wild nights.

But, brothers, this night was different from most because the tension in Tascosa and round about was tighter'n a lass rope with a steer spillin' off the loop end. Both sides were getting set for the struggle, and both sides had plenty strength. This was no penny ante game that Jim Hatfield was hornin' into. The Lone Wolf was in the Equity saloon when—

Suddenly all hades busted loose. Not inside the saloon but in the street beyond the swinging

[*Turn page*]

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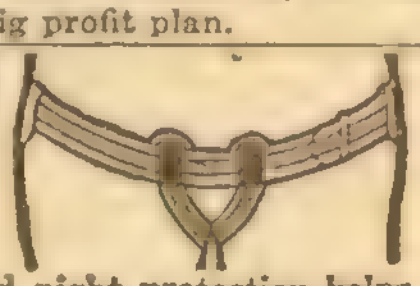

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doors. There was a stutter of shots, a clang-jangling of breaking glass, wild yells and whoops, and a veritable drumroll of speeding hoofs. Again the guns rang out, closer. There was a howling and cursing outside, and the pad of running feet.

"It's the Beechers," somebody howled. "They're gunnin' the town! Lemme outa here!"

Things happening? Something going on? Folks, the Lone Wolf kills his own snakes—we don't need to tell yuh that. But this time he's got himself a whole den of 'em to smash, and every single one of 'em fanged and furious. The whole story is in THE STAR-LIGHT RIDERS, comin' in the next issue.

But you're not through with the issue when you've finished with the featured novel. There'll be some swell short stories, among them a fine yarn by Joseph Chadwick, titled SEND ONE RANGER. Another, by Paul S. Powers, wears the interesting handle, BOOTHILL IS MY DESTINATION. Both these yarns will hold you, as will others in the same book—and the departments. Get set for some grand readin' in the next issue, all you buckaroos!

OUR MAIL BAG

THE office boy came in just now with so heavy a bale of letters and cards from you gals and galluses that we noticed he was slightly knee-sprung from the load. But that's all right. He doesn't hold it against you, and we certainly don't, 'cause letters are the spice of life to this here department, and you readers do know how to write 'em! Here are some of 'em and you be the judge:

All the stories in TEXAS RANGERS are tops and worth-while. You can make this magazine the best seller on all newsstands because Texas is a great state and other parts of the country would like to learn more about her.—*Frank Terry McCoy, Houston, Texas.*

Texas *is* a great state, Frank—no argument on that score.

I like your stories, and I would like for Jim Hatfield to fall in love or get married. His stories would be just as good, I bet.—*Carlton Carroll, Adger, Ala.*

Well, Carlton, you know how they said it in the Rangers—"A Ranger rides a long trail, and he rides it alone."

I started reading TEXAS RANGERS in January, and I have found it to be the best magazine I have seen. I hope the latest issue, which I have right now, is as good as the others I have read to date. Ranger Jim Hatfield stories are the kind of good reading I like. —*Alfred Kolodziejski, Detroit, Mich.*

Thanks, Alfred. We'll try to keep up our high standards. And here are more letters:

Thank you very much for the entertainment your magazine, TEXAS RANGERS, has given me in past years, with its good clear reading type and fine yarns. Jim Hatfield is a favorite.—*"Long Shorty" McEvoy, Vancouver, B. C.*

I have read TEXAS RANGERS for two years, and I think it is a swell book. Like Hatfield, I like to ride and don't know what I would do if I didn't have a horse.—*Allen Plagens, Reisel, Texas.*

I have been reading TEXAS RANGERS for several years, and I think Hatfield is my favorite, with Long Sam Littlejohn second. Hatfield was a lot better in '39 and '40 than he is now, I think.—*William Malone, Salem, Mo.*

I have read your magazine for three years and still enjoy it. Keep them coming like SIX-GUN SYNDICATE.—*Eddie Boles, Keithville, La.*

I have been reading your westerns quite a while, and TEXAS RANGERS is my favorite.—*Preston Luttrell, Cincinnati, Ohio.*

I really enjoy TEXAS RANGERS except for one thing—I don't like the short stories. I like the long ones, like the Jim Hatfield stories.—*PFC Shiuji Takie, Fitzsimmons General Hospital, Denver, Colorado.*

The Jim Hatfield stories seem more real than any others to me. My state is Oklahoma but I am in the Army. I would rather read your stories than to see any movie. I work on the railroad track crew and I sure enjoy reading.—*Pvt. Charles W. Casey, Fort Richardson, Alaska.*

The best story I ever read was SIX-GUN SYNDICATE. The other stories are good, too, especially the Doc Swap stories. TEXAS RANGERS is tops on my list for western fiction.—*Philip Greely, Quincy, Mass.*

In the latest issue of TEXAS RANGERS some letter writer said that the west wasn't the rootin', tootin', shootin' west the stories tell about. But these stories are fiction, and they have to have some excitement, and an author has to use his imagination. Keep up the good work.—*Loretta Erdman, Sauris, North Dakota.*

Of all the western magazines I have read, I find TEXAS RANGERS the best. Hatfield is an exciting gent, even if he is a fiction character. I enjoy the short stories, too, especially "Long Sam" and Doc Swap.—*Wm. K. Asbury, Marion, Virginia.*

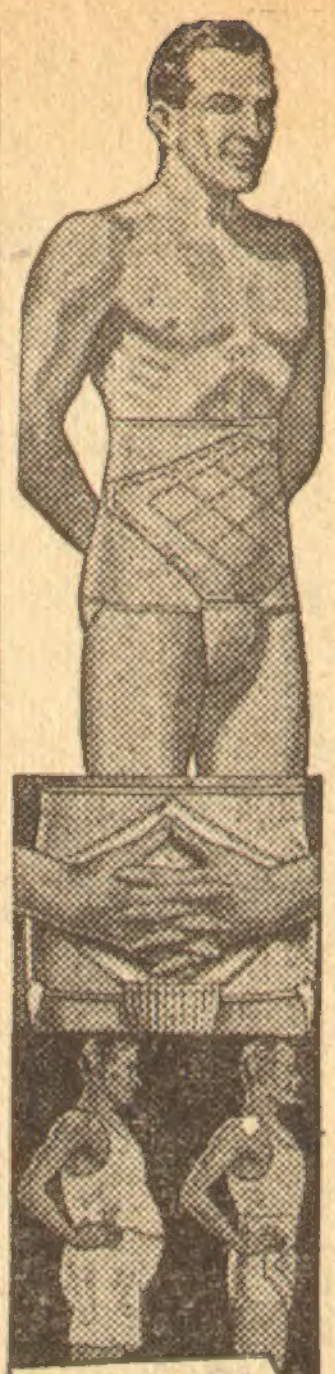
I thought "Range Pirates" was a fine story. I would like for Jim Hatfield to work on a case with a haunted house in it. I don't think Jim should marry, but I'd like to have more love in the book.—*Leo Underwood, Austin, Kentucky.*

I have read your magazine for a long time and admire it very much. I believe you should give Jim Hatfield a partner, preferably a Mexican with a name like Juan Castillo or Pablo Gonzales—just as Bob Pryor has a partner, Celestino Mireles. The present issue of the book is very good— I couldn't find a better one.—*Raye Vosburg, Webster, Mass.*

Jackson Cole's novel, "Vanishing Vaqueros," was simply terrific, and the cover was a dandy.—*Joe Modica, Philadelphia, Pa.*

There you have it, folks. All for this time. Write us, won't you? Please address your letter or postcard The Editor, TEXAS RANGERS, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. Thanks, and good luck!

—THE EDITOR.



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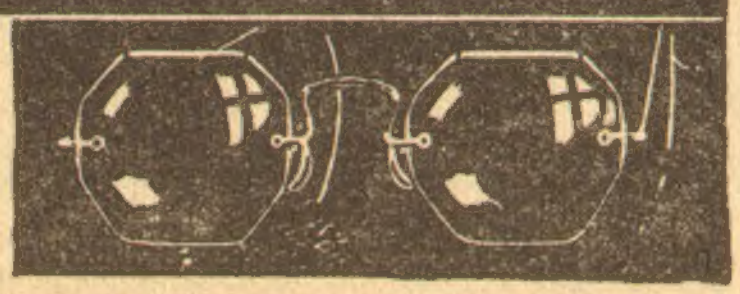
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